The Bound to Win Stories

PHIL HARDY'S TRIUMPH

EDWIN ALGEI

BOUND TO WIN STORIES

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By

EDWIN ALGER

In this story Phil Hardy is the victim of a gang whose thefts he had once exposed. His home is burned to the ground and, with his mother, he barely escapes death. Relying on Mr. Dennison, his employer, he is forced to borrow a considerable sum of money for a new home.

Upon his return to the city and his job at the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation he finds Mr. Dennison absent on an ocean voyage and a new man, Desmond Skinner, in his place. Skinner treats the boy miserably, shunting him back to a laborer's job at reduced pay, and finally discharging him. Meanwhile Phil's notes for the money he borrowed are coming due. The story tells how he met adversity and finally, in a series of thrilling adventures along a lonely stretch of coast known as the Skeleton Bay country, helped to hunt down Gore's gang and expose Desmond Skinner as their leader.

LOOK ON THE REVERSE SIDE OF THIS JACKET

PRESERVE THIS WRAPPER FOR FUTURE REFERENCE

PHIL HARDY'S TRIUMPH

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PHIL ENGULFED BY A BILLOW OF SMOKE, SAW THE LURID GLOW OF THE FLAMES.

Phil Hardy's Triumph. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 29)

BOUND TO WIN SERIES

PHIL HARDY'S TRIUMPH

BY

EDWIN ALGER

AUTHOR OF

PHIL HARDY'S STRUGGLE

PHIL HARDY'S GREATEST TEST

ILLUSTRATED BY

ERNEST N. TOWNSEND

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To

JOHN N. WHEELER

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PHIL HARDY'S TRIUMPH

CHAPTER I

STRANGE NEWS FROM HOME

PHIL HARDY swung around in his chair and looked out of the window. Far below he caught the glint of sunshine on the waters of the river and saw the long, low warehouses and piers beside which, resting at anchor, rode ships from far-off ports. Strange, foreign flags of countries all over the world fluttered in the breeze from their masts. It was a scene of which he never tired, for he was a part of it—a living, active part of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation, and he loved every part of the work he had to do.

The door to his tidy little office opened, and Mr. George Dennison, a kindly faced, elderly man, and the president of the company, entered. He held a radio message in his hand.

"Listen to this, Phil," he said to the boy, "the *China Queen* arrived in Manila to-day."

"Golly!" exclaimed Phil, "I helped unload that ship. That was my first job when I came to work here. Just think, and now she's halfway round the world."

"A good deal has happened since then, hasn't it?" said Mr. Dennison with a smile.

"You bet it has," declared Phil.

When Mr. Dennison left the room, Phil recollected that indeed a good deal had happened. He recalled how, as a country boy with a widowed mother to support, he had come to the city in search of work; how, when he found it with the Seven Seas Company, he almost at once came into conflict with "Four Egg" Gore, a great brute of a man who was his foreman, and who suc-

ceeded in having him shanghaied and put aboard the *Black Castle,* an old and sinister tramp steamer bound for Africa. Mutiny, shipwreck and adventures galore had followed, as all those who read *Phil Hardy's Struggle* know, and now Phil, his enemies scattered, was back on the job, a better and more interesting job, incidentally, than his first one.

Gore had disappeared, and "Ghost" Hansen and "Baldy" Scott, his two confederates and the ringleaders of the mutiny, were in jail. Phil knew that justice had been cheated when Gore, the brutal foreman who had caused the boy to be shanghaied on the ill-fated *Black Castle,* had escaped from the authorities, and there were times when the fact that this desperate man was at large aroused apprehensive thoughts. These periods, however, were fleeting, for Phil was engrossed by the interesting work before him. There was only one thing which really worried him. Since his return to the city and the home of Officer Healy, where

he boarded, he had lost all trace of Jason Royle, the cook on the *Black Castle,* and the boy's stanchest friend.

Phil and Jason had returned together to the city, where the boy had met his mother and had gone direct to her little home in Pleasanton. In the meantime, Jason, being no great letter writer, had failed to communicate with Phil, and when the latter returned to the city in his new and splendid position with the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation, he had been unable to find any trace of the jovial old cook—his courageous comrade all during the mutiny on the tramp steamer, as well as the hurricane at sea when the ship went down. Both Phil and Jason had been saved from certain death by the rescue of themselves, as well as the loyal members of the crew and the mutineers, and it was this rescue, coupled with the boy's return to the city, that had exposed the plotting and stealing of "Four Egg" Gore and his confederates.

It was at the home of Officer Healy, a

trusty, honest policeman, that Phil had first found a refuge on his arrival to seek fame and fortune in the great city, and despite the fact that his foot was now firmly planted on the first rung of the ladder of success, the boy chose to remain in what to other lads in prosperous circumstances might seem rather humble surroundings. The Healys, though, were true friends, and Phil was not the type of boy who might forget kindnesses paid him when he was struggling upward.

"Come, gentlemen, to your supper and a surprise," was Mrs. Healy's announcement that evening to her husband and Phil, as well as to Tim, her son, a boy about Phil's age. The eyes of Officer Healy and Tim twinkled when Mrs. Healy smilingly winked and Phil divined that they, too, were in on the secret.

"A nice man came here this afternoon for room and board," continued Mrs. Healy. "He took the small spare room——"

At that moment the door of the spare

room opened and out stepped none other than Jason Royle, resplendent in a rather vividly checked suit and other outward manifestations of prosperity, but he was the same old cook whom Phil had met on the *Black Castle;* the same old Jason with a jolly, broad smile spread over his honest face.

"Jason!" exclaimed Phil.

"You can't lose me," replied Jason with a chuckle, "I'm a sticker! And, you see, I'd heard so much about the Healy family from you and so much about the delightful food they serve hereabouts that the first chance I got I made tracks for these moorings, and here I am!"

Phil was so delighted to see his cheerful old companion of *Black Castle* days, and Jason was so glad to see him, that they embraced one another, and from then on words flew back and forth so fast that Mrs. Healy had to remind them twice that their meal was ready.

At the supper table, Jason kept up a run-

ning fire of conversation, convulsing everyone with his comments on men and affairs, food and drink, and other essentials of life and happiness.

"And this steak, Mrs. Healy," said Jason, "is as tender as a woman's smile."

"Now, Mr. Royle, you go on," said Mrs. Healy, blushing, but pleased nevertheless.

"Where have you been keeping yourself, Jason?" asked Phil. "And what are you doing or going to do? My mother only saw you once before she went back to Pleasanton. None of us knew where you went."

"Sonny," began Jason, "I've been nosin' down 'round the water front ever since I left you, and from the taste of the food down there I've figgered that a sailors' eatin' house, owned and operated by old Jason Royle, would do right well in that vicinity. Meantime, I'd also figgered, as I told you, how nice it'd be if I could dock at the Healy home, so I dropped anchor here."

"And it's right glad we are to have ye," responded Officer Healy with emphasis.

The entire Healy family seemed to have adopted Jason at once.

After supper Tim went to the door for the evening paper which he tendered to Jason on his return. Jason was unmindful of it until Officer Healy and Phil had left the room for a few minutes, then, left to his own resources, he picked it up, put on his spectacles and began to read. As Officer Healy and Phil returned to the room, they were amazed to see Jason staring at the paper with bulging eyes, while a long, low whistle came from his pursed up lips.

"What's the matter?" they inquired almost in the same breath.

"Will you look at this!" exclaimed Jason, pointing a stubby forefinger at a glaring headline. "The *Black Castle* mutineers have broken jail! Four of them have been recaptured but 'Ghost' Hansen and Baldy Scott are still at large! Maybe that's not bad news, eh?"

Officer Healy shook his head slowly and a worried look spread over his rugged face.

Phil, too, was greatly upset by the startling news, and for a long time that evening he and Jason and Officer Healy discussed the jail-break and the fact that Hansen and Scott had made their get-away.

When Phil saw Mr. Dennison the next day, he also was greatly disturbed over the news. Phil asked him if he thought all the men would be captured.

"I hope so," said Mr. Dennison earnestly, "but these people seem to be able to evade the law pretty successfully and hide away like rats. I am mighty sorry they got away before they were punished for their crimes. Just think! We have had detectives following Gore ever since he lit out of here, but they haven't turned up a trace of him."

When Phil returned to the Healy home that night the news of the escape of the mutineers was the chief topic of conversation. Officer Healy came in from work just before supper, and finding Phil in the little sitting room with the others, beckoned him out into the hallway.

"Phil, me lad," he whispered to the boy, "I've a bit of news for you to-night and it's so secret ye'll have to kape it. I was down to headquarters to-day and the Chief showed me a private message. It said that Hansen and Scott, ringleaders of the *Black Castle* mutiny, were supposed to be headin' this way, intendin', the Chief thinks, to join up with Gore."

"Golly!" exclaimed Phil. "Is Gore supposed to be around here some place?"

"He's not far from these parts," said Officer Healy slowly, "but just where he is, is somethin' the whole force would give its right arm to know!"

Phil, while at work the next day, tried hard to dismiss from his mind all thoughts of Gore, Hansen and Scott. Officer Healy had assured him that he would let him know as soon as he had learned anything new. Phil remembered that "Ghost" Hansen had threatened to get even with him and while he was not afraid, still, a threat from that desperate individual was foreboding. The

postman at the Healy home, several mornings later, gave Phil a letter from Pleasanton. Walking down toward town with Jason, Phil opened it and read the contents.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, "this is funny. Mother writes that she got home all right and found everything fine but that yesterday and the day before she noticed some strange men around back of the house——"

"Oh, just some stray tramps maybe," interposed Jason.

"No," continued Phil, "I wish they had been, but I'm afraid they were not. Mother said that one of them looked for all the world like the way I described Baldy Scott to her."

"What!" exploded Jason, turning on Phil. The old man was shocked by Phil's statement and showed his amazement in unmistakable fashion. "Sonny," he continued, "that's bad news. What'll you do about it?"

"There's only one thing to do," said Phil, "and that's to go home to Mother as fast as

I can. She wouldn't write me this letter if she were not worried, and I'm afraid she is in danger. I'll go straight to the office, and get permission from Mr. Dennison to go home."

"Do you think old Jason had better go with you?" asked the cook.

But Phil, mindful of Jason's desire to start at once his sailors' tavern at the water front, and knowing that he had not any extra money to spend on unnecessary expenses, realized what a sacrifice the old cook would make if he accompanied him at this time.

"Why, Jason, thanks ever so much," said Phil, "but when I get there maybe I'll find things not as bad as I think they are. Perhaps Mother is overly excited."

"Well all right, Sonny," declared Jason, "but remember this, if you need me, wire me at once and old Jason'll come a-runnin'!"

When Phil saw Mr. Dennison that morning and told him of the letter he had received from his mother, the ship magnate

lost no time in telling the boy that he believed his place, for the time being at any rate, was at home with his mother. Accordingly, the night train for Pleasanton carried as one of its passengers Phil Hardy. Little did he realize, as the train sped through the gloom, that he was heading for perils and adventures that would almost dwarf into insignificance the thrilling times he had experienced on the *Black Castle.*

CHAPTER II

THE DISASTER AT PLEASANTON

Two things worried Mrs. Susan Hardy, the first of which had caused her to write the letter she did to Phil.

One was the sight of two men one evening at twilight in the rear of her home. As they passed across the open fields at the back of her property, their furtive looks, their slinking walk, and the way they loitered had attracted her attention. She had watched them out of sight from behind the curtains of her kitchen window. They were rough, evil-looking characters and the smaller one, on removing his cap momentarily, revealed a bald and shining pate. So vivid and clear cut had been Phil's description of Baldy Scott and "Ghost" Hansen that Mrs. Hardy, already cognizant, through the news-

papers, of the escape of the ringleaders of the mutineers, believed absolutely the man she accidentally saw was Baldy Scott.

The other thing occurred the day after Mrs. Hardy had written and dispatched her letter to Phil. She had gone to Zeke Wharton's general store to make some minor purchases. Standing at the counter was the same man she had seen the previous evening. Ed Turner, the voluble buck-toothed clerk, was waiting on the man, and Mrs. Hardy heard him say:

"So, you're an old miner, be you? Well, now, if that ain't the green apples!" Then Ed Turner, after presenting several parcels to the stranger, turned to Mrs. Hardy.

"Well, good afternoon, Mrs. Hardy," he said. "How's Phil? S'pose he's got over his adventures by now, eh?"

Mrs. Hardy noticed that at the mention of her name and more so at the mention of Phil, the stranger stopped short in surprise. His perturbation was such that he dropped one of the parcels he was carrying. Hastily

picking it up, however, he turned and walked rapidly out of the store.

"Mr. Turner, who is the man who just left?" asked Phil's mother.

"I dunno," replied the clerk. "He's a stranger to me, ma'am. Only been in two or three times before—always buys beans and bacon and says he's an old miner. Durned if I know whether he's tellin' the truth or lyin'."

If by some magic Mrs. Hardy could have read the thoughts of the retreating stranger, as he almost ran down a country lane, she would indeed have had cause for alarm.

"Mrs. Hardy!" the man said. "That's what the clerk called her. And he asked her how Phil was. Wonder what the 'Ghost' will say to that?"

Baldy Scott, for it was none other than the renegade mutineer, quickened his pace. He turned off the main street and down a little country road which, after a few minutes' walk, led into a clump of woods. There, his low whistle brought forth an answering

one. Sheltered on the far side of the woods, with only an open rolling country facing him, and no houses within sight or hearing, was "Ghost" Hansen. He sat on a log near which he had kindled a small fire. A black pot stood over this. Baldy soon reached him and, throwing the packages he was carrying onto the ground beside the fire, he began his recital of what had transpired in the general store. The "Ghost" rose to his feet in excitement as Baldy continued, and his muttered threats accompanied Baldy's tale.

"The old dame looked pretty close at me," said Baldy, "and old Buck Tooth hailed her as Mrs. Hardy and asked her how Phil was. She watched me when I left the store, but she couldn't follow me very long 'cause I turned off the street, but when I got around the corner I waited and watched her. She went out and up the street and entered a little house. I guess that's where she lives. Now then, we'd better make tracks. Don't you think so? Let's pull up anchor and get out o' here!"

"Hold on!" snarled the "Ghost." "What's the rush? I'm for doin' a little investigatin' 'round that house to-night. You marked it, didn't you? You could find it again?"

"Oh, I could find it all right," said Baldy. "It's a little white cottage, with a white picket fence 'round it. It's on the left-hand side of the street beyond the general store."

Baldy went on describing minutely the location of Mrs. Hardy's house, while the "Ghost" listened intently. There was something in the latter's manner which caused Baldy to stop short for a moment, eye him closely, then blurt out:

" 'Ghost,' you're a fool! Do you want to be caught?"

By way of answer the "Ghost" turned angrily, looming over his smaller companion, clenched his right fist and, swinging the hooked iron that served for his lower left arm, he shouted:

"I know what I'm doin'. You'n me'd be soppin' up milk and honey instead o'

beans, and sleepin' on feathers instead o' fence rails, if it hadn't been for that kid! You leave this to me!"

Shortly after his escape, and in order not to arouse suspicion, the "Ghost" had wrapped rags around the steel hook on his left arm and substituted a soft glove for a hand. He swung this wildly at Baldy as he talked. There was no mistaking the fury in his face and the anger in his soul as he spoke. Indeed, his wrath was such that even Baldy was intimidated by it and, realizing that nothing he could say would dissuade the "Ghost" from his purpose, he turned his attention to opening the packages he had brought and began preparing their meal. All evening thereafter and until Baldy had dropped off to sleep, the "Ghost" brooded over his thoughts.

So, while Phil Hardy, aboard the night express, sped toward Pleasanton, a sinister figure slunk through the shadows near Mrs. Hardy's home. It was "Ghost" Hansen. He had left Baldy asleep in the woods and had

stolen back into the village unseen by anybody. The "Ghost" had no set plan. He only knew that a deep hatred for anything that bore the name of Hardy urged him on.

Mrs. Hardy sat in her sitting room, knitting beside a table on which stood a kerosene lamp. The room was peaceful and quiet, except for the ticking of the clock and the click of knitting needles. There was a great content and happiness in Mrs. Hardy's heart, for Phil was coming home that night. He was on the way now. But if Mrs. Hardy had turned her head toward one of the windows where the shade was not entirely down, and seen the scowling face of Ghost Hansen pressed against the pane, her peace and contentment would have fled at once.

"Goodness, it's way past my bedtime!" said Mrs. Hardy, noting the hour, "but I must wait up for Phil. It was thoughtful of him to wire me he was coming. Reckon it was foolish of me to write and take him away from his work, but I did feel uneasy!"

It was nearly midnight when Phil arrived

in Pleasanton. The little railroad station stood dark and deserted. Phil was the only passenger to alight from the train, and all the village was asleep as he hurried home. Mrs. Hardy was overjoyed when she heard her son's knock at the front door and admitted him. She promptly forgot all about her recent anxiety, and mother and son sat in the little parlor talking until a late hour.

"I can't tell you how happy you have made me by coming," said Mrs. Hardy. "I was so worried I didn't know what to do. That's why I bothered you."

"You didn't bother me at all, Mother," said Phil.

"Now that you're here, though, I'm not scared at all," continued Mrs. Hardy. "I guess you think that I am just a scary old lady."

"Why, Mother," said Phil, patting Mrs. Hardy on the shoulder. "I never feel that way about you, and you know it."

Meantime, in the back yard, "Ghost" Hansen was trying windows. He finally

came to a cellar window which had not been latched. With a muttered exclamation of elation, the "Ghost" pushed the window back.

"Here's one window the old dame forgot to lock," he said to himself. "Guess I'll hop in and take a look."

Letting himself down noiselessly on the floor of the cellar, the "Ghost" struck a match and tried to pierce the gloom under the little arc of light. Suddenly he stood tense.

"Voices!" he said. "I thought the old dame was alone." He had been skulking in the rear of the house when Phil came home and was unaware of the boy's arrival. Listening intently, he discovered that the other voice was that of Phil Hardy. In the sitting room above the cellar where "Ghost" stood, Phil was holding the kerosene lamp, preparatory to lighting their way to the upper floor, and asking Mrs. Hardy if everything were locked up.

"Everything except the cellar window,"

she replied. "I left that for the boy to bring in wood, but the cellar door is locked, and bolted, too."

"Will you need any wood brought up to-night?" asked Phil.

"Ghost" Hansen, below, heard this question plainly. He did not want to meet Phil to-night. In the first place he was unprepared. While he knew that if the boy came down into the cellar he could handle him without any trouble, yet he feared that in the ensuing commotion Mrs. Hardy might be able to summon assistance from her neighbors. Fortunately for Hansen's plans, Mrs. Hardy told Phil—again loud enough for him to overhear her—that there was plenty of wood in the kitchen for the morning fires.

"Blast him!" exclaimed the "Ghost." "I'll go back and get Baldy. The two of us will be able to handle this job."

Emerging noiselessly from the cellar, the "Ghost" ran down the lane back of the house, across the open fields, and finally

reached the clump of woods where Baldy lay asleep in a near-by haystack.

"Baldy!" called Hansen, kicking his feet roughly. "I've been over to the old dame's house and got into her cellar and guess who's with her? The Kid!"

"The Kid!" exclaimed Baldy, sitting up suddenly and wide awake at once. "Then I'm for clearin' out!"

Ghost Hansen reached over with his good hand and grabbed Baldy's shoulder with fingers of iron.

"Clear out nothin'," he snarled. "There's more'n five hundred bucks in that shack that the Kid got as a reward, and five hundred bucks will see us on our way to Gore."

The two renegades—Ghost prompted by the thought of revenge and greed, and Baldy following helplessly in the wake of his more evil companion—started for the little cottage that was the Hardy home. They slunk along the dark country road, crossed the open fields and finally arrived at the little lane which ran along the rear of the cottage.

There, guided only by the Ghost's sense of direction, they crept silently into the back yard and, crawling on their hands and knees, they located the unlocked cellar window. Thus far they had made no sound and had not been seen by anyone. The Ghost, always in the lead, groped for a moment or two and gave a little whisper of triumph when the window, under the pressure of his hand, swung open. He turned to Baldy and whispered:

"Follow me. It's just about a four-foot drop. Careful now, don't make any noise."

Both men negotiated noiselessly the narrow opening, and safely within the cellar they halted momentarily. The house was strangely silent. Indeed, the silence was so complete that even their muffled breathing seemed loud by contrast. They remained motionless for a second or two until the Ghost whipped a match along his trousers' leg and they saw by the ensuing flare the dim outline of the cellar and the wooden steps leading to the floor above.

"Them's the stairs," whispered the Ghost. "After we pry off the lock it will be easy to slide back the bolt. Got plenty of matches?"

By way of reply Baldy struck a match, and by its flickering light they crept up the stairway. Baldy kept close behind Hansen. As each match flared up for a few seconds and then died away, he lighted another from the ember of the expiring one. The Ghost meanwhile had inserted a fine steel bar in the crack of the door and was trying in this manner to locate the bolt that barred it, intending when he found it to pry it from its fastenings. In the sputtering glow of the matchlight, the two criminals worked for perhaps five minutes. Just as the Ghost felt that the resistance of the bolt was diminishing, however, he stopped abruptly and, turning so suddenly he almost threw Baldy who was close beside him down the flight of steps, he peered into the cellar below. There he saw flickering flames and shadows.

"Hello, Baldy!" he whispered sharply, "what's that light?"

Baldy saw the light at the same time. His ugly little face, illuminated by the halo of light from the match he held in his hand, screwed up with the appearance of fear, then blanched white.

"Strike me dead!" he exclaimed. "Did I drop a match?"

The distant shadows below, now suddenly brighter, answered his question. There was an ominous crackle from the foot of the stairway and an angry tongue of fire licked around the wooden post that supported the stairs. It was followed by another, then still another, grown larger. A little billow of smoke rose at the same time. There was no mistaking what had happened. A carelessly dropped match, from Baldy's hands, had lighted a pile of kindling wood and excelsior close beside the cellar stairway, and the fire had followed and gained real headway while the two men were busy on the landing above.

"You fool!" snarled the Ghost to his companion. "You've spoiled everything. Come on, let's git!"

And while Phil Hardy and his mother were sound asleep above, the two outlaws, with fear lending speed to their every movement, dashed down the stairway, through the smoke of the cellar and out the window. Meantime, the fire had gained great headway. In less than a minute or two after the Ghost and Baldy had made their escape, the cellar was a seething furnace and the flames had successfully conquered the stairs and were now burning their way into the first floor of the cottage.

Phil was ordinarily a sound sleeper, and after the unusual excitement and fatigue of the railroad trip, and his conversation with his mother until a late hour, he had retired to his bed with the expectation of unbroken rest until the morning. Hence his surprise when he wakened in the dead of night and sat upright in his bed. He had a vague sense of alarm. An indefinable odor of

smoke was in the air, yet the silence of the night was so complete that Phil was half tempted to believe his nostrils were mistaken and go back to sleep. Listening carefully he heard nothing, yet as he was on the point of returning to his pillow, a feathery finger of smoke seemed to reach him, and he heard an alarming sound as of crackling wood. At this, Phil leaped noiselessly out of bed, struck a match and lighted the kerosene lamp that stood on a near-by table.

"I'm sure I smell smoke," he said. "Perhaps I'd better investigate."

Holding the kerosene lamp in his hand, he tiptoed from his bedroom into the hallway. One look over the rail of the stairway sufficed. Phil was not only engulfed by a billow of smoke that rose up the staircase, but he saw the lurid glow of the flames below and heard the frightful crackle from the fire under full headway. Dashing into his mother's room, Phil hastily wakened her.

"Get up, Mother!" he cried. "The house is on fire; No time to dress—I think we can

get out by the back stairs—here's a bathrobe and slippers!"

Mrs. Hardy, with a cry of dismay, rose from her bed as Phil slipped her bathrobe on her and led her from the room. When they reached the hall they saw that descent by way of the front stairs was out of the question. Already the fire had enveloped the lower front part of the house. The front stairway was ablaze now. The back stairs offered the only chance of escape and Phil, who had not seen them as yet, because they were shut off from the upper story by a door at their top, prayed silently that they would offer a way out. Alternately pushing and leading Mrs. Hardy along the narrow hallway, the boy reached the back staircase and opened the door. So far so good! The stairs were whole and entire but at their base Phil saw angry little fangs of fire darting this way and that.

"Hurry, Mother!" he cried. "We've no time to lose!"

Phil does not know to this day exactly

how he got down the back stairway. He remembers vaguely that with his mother in his arms—with a corner of her robe thrown protectively over her face and his own face pressed closely against her—he staggered blindly through the smoke-filled corridor, stairway and kitchen, and out the back door to the fresh air and safety. Once outside the house, Mrs. Hardy broke into tears.

"Oh, Son," she cried. "We'll lose everything!"

Phil, his arms protectingly about her, tried his best to cheer her.

"But we've saved our lives, Mother," he said.

There was no time for further solace. Phil aroused the nearest neighbors, the alarm of fire was sounded, and the volunteer department of Pleasanton, with its single hand-pump engine, reached the Hardy home ten minutes later. By this time the little cottage was alive with flames. The entire village was up and neighbors from near and far, many of them half dressed,

reached the scene. As the one hose poured its stream of water into the burning dwelling, Phil was the first to see the futility of the effort to save the house. Kindly neighbors took charge of his mother and insisted that she accept refuge in their dwelling across the street. Phil was still in his nightgown but, in the excitement of the hour, he did not notice how incongruous his costume was. Nor did he realize until later that he and his mother had not only lost their house but practically all the rest of their worldly possessions. The fire had gained such headway before help had arrived that not one thing could be carried from the house.

Mrs. Hardy broke into tears again as through the window of the sitting room of their place of refuge she saw the little home of which she had been so proud, tumble and fall into a mass of glowing embers, in spite of the work of the valiant firemen who exerted every effort to save what they could.

"Cheer up, Mother," said Phil comfortingly. "We ought to be thankful we es-

caped with our lives. Don't you worry! We'll come out all right!"

" 'Deed you will," said Mrs. Stone, the kindly woman at whose home they were, who entered the room at that moment. She looked at Phil with amazement, raised her hands on high and ejaculated:

"Law me, Phil! You'd better get some clothes on or you'll catch your death o' cold. Go right up in my husband's room and dress up in whatever you find. Things may fit you twice over, but they'll do for the time being anyway."

Phil, now realizing how scanty was his attire, was glad to take advantage of Mrs. Stone's offer, and from Mr. Stone's wardrobe the boy was able to piece together an outfit which, if slightly large, was comfortingly warm to his chilled body. There was no sleep for Phil the remainder of the night. He knew that his mother's house was entirely destroyed. He knew also that it was up to him to get busy at once so that another one might be built for her. He could not

bear to think of the heartache she was now undergoing, and he knew that the only way to ease her sorrow was to cheer her with plans for a new and better house at once.

So Phil, alone in the little bedroom Mrs. Stone had given him, thought and planned until the first faint traces of dawn appeared.

Meanwhile, another scene was being enacted on a lonely road far to the west of Pleasanton. Quarreling and snarling, two men strode down this roadway. One of them was the Ghost. He turned to his smaller companion and jabbed home the accusation that he had made perhaps a hundred times before that same night.

"Yes," snarled the Ghost, "and if you hadn't dropped that lighted match, we'd be ridin' the rods 'stead o' hoofin' it this way."

"Aw, lay off," snapped back Baldy.

"Naw," snorted the Ghost. "I won't lay off. It's two days' hoofin' afore we dock alongside Gore, and we'd be there to-night if it wasn't for you, you poor fool!"

"All right! All right!" agreed Baldy,

angrily. "I'm to blame for everything. But you were the first fool to think they had that five hundred in the house." Baldy then turned to pacify his companion, and said slyly:

"Wonder if the house burned down and if the kid and his mother got out?"

"What if they didn't?" shot back the Ghost, wheeling savagely on the other. "They got enough to hang us with, whatever happened!"

CHAPTER III

ASA CRABTREE'S LOAN AND THREAT

PHIL spent the first part of the next morning in cheering up his mother. Mrs. Hardy had been able to gain but little sleep through the night, and was very shaken and unnerved. Her exhausted appearance made Phil feel miserably, but he believed that by telling her his plans for the future he could end her fears, so he bent every energy to do so.

"You rest to-day, Mother," said Phil, "and don't feel badly."

"I'll try, Phil," she replied, "but it's terrible to think our home is gone; the little cottage I went to as a bride. You were born there; your father died there. It meant everything to me—" She had begun

bravely, but at this point her feelings overcame her courage.

"I know it," interrupted Phil. "But we'll build a new home and a better one. You had a thousand-dollar fire insurance policy, and I have six hundred dollars in the bank, and I just know I can borrow whatever more money we need from Mr. Dennison!" Mrs. Hardy brightened momentarily, and Phil was quick to take advantage of her fleeting cheerfulness.

"Why, Mother," he continued. "You just leave this to me. I'll find a way to do it! First off, I'll go to see if I can find out how this fire started, then I'll see about the insurance, and then see Bill Small, the carpenter, about building a new house. I want to get your new home started just as soon as possible, and it's going to be a nicer and more comfortable one than the old one ever was, see!"

"Oh, Phil!" exclaimed his mother hopefully. "You're the best boy in the world."

After a few more cheering words, a com-

forting pat on the shoulder and a heartfelt kiss, Phil started off toward the village. Hardly had he left his mother's presence when Mrs. Stone appeared in the room.

"I just couldn't help overhearing Phil talk with you, Mrs. Hardy," she said smilingly, "and it seems to me you shouldn't have much to fret about with that boy around."

"He's wonderful, isn't he?" said Mrs. Hardy, asking and answering her question at one and the same breath. She smiled happily as she spoke.

Meantime, Phil had crossed the street, gone through the little white picket gate and was examining the desolate ruins of his old home. He circled the house and could not restrain a sigh, as he saw how complete the destruction of the fire had been. A few blackened posts, an iron bedstead or two that had been bent and twisted by the heat, and just pile after pile of ashes were all that remained of the Hardy home. In the rear of the house Phil noticed a knife lying

on the ground. It was far enough away not to have been touched by the fire, and it had one blade—the large one—open. It was the glint of the sunshine upon the blade that attracted his attention.

"Hello," he exclaimed, taking it up, "here's a knife somebody dropped." Phil turned it over and saw that the little silver shield on one side of the handle bore the initials "H. S."

"I'll bet it's Harry Stone's," Phil went on. "He's the boy who brought in wood for Mother. It probably fell out of his pocket yesterday."

Almost as if in answer to his thought, Harry Stone, a nephew of the woman at whose home Phil and his mother were staying, appeared.

"Hello, Phil," was his greeting, as he extended his hand. "Gee! I'm sorry about your home burning, Phil."

"So am I, Harry," returned Phil. "Mother feels pretty badly. By the way, I just found your knife over there. Here it

is." Phil handed the knife to the other boy, who examined it carefully, then returned it to him.

"It's got my initials all right," he said, "but it isn't my knife. Mine is right here in my pocket."

"I'll keep it then," said Phil. "I wonder whose it is, though?" But Phil had no further time for thought about the knife, because he saw Bill Small, the village carpenter, coming through the gate and picking his way around the ruins left by the fire.

"I was just starting down to see you, Mr. Small," said Phil, going to meet him. "I wanted to talk to you about rebuilding our house. You built the old one, Mother says."

"Yep, I did," replied Small, "and if I remember rightly, it set your Pap back about twelve hundred dollars."

"Is that all?" asked Phil hopefully.

"Yep," replied the village carpenter, "but 'course the same house'd cost you twenty-five hundred—mebbe three thousand

now. Lumber and everything's higher these days."

"Well," said Phil, "let's see if we can't do some figuring and find out just what it would be."

Whereupon they sat down on an old sawbuck by the shed and Phil watched Bill make figures on the back of an envelope with a stubby pencil. The total was $3,000.

After some time Bill left and Phil remained sitting on the sawbuck. He calculated that with the thousand-dollar insurance money and five hundred of the six hundred that he had in his savings account, he would have at least half the cost of the new house. Bill Small had told him that he would start building the dwelling at once, providing that Phil would pay one-half down and the other half at the end of six months. Phil was sorely tempted to telegraph Mr. Dennison and ask him if he would loan him the necessary fifteen hundred dollars to make up the other half. At the same

time, however, Phil thought how splendid it would be if he were able in some fashion to finance entirely the building of the house and pay back the money he would borrow out of his earnings. He knew that banks loaned money, and with this thought in mind he arose from the sawbuck and bravely set out to call on Asa Crabtree, the village banker.

Pleasanton, like most small places, had its full measure of characters and chief among them was Asa Crabtree. Tall, cadaverous, and thin-lipped, with cold gray eyes and expressionless face, Asa Crabtree was almost the storybook rendition of the grasping banker. Indeed, he seemed to revel in the reputation created about him, for it was Asa himself who gave rise to the saying that every copper penny that entered the institution was squeezed so hard that the Indian on it screamed with pain. Phil was aware of this tight-fisted character and realized, as he strode off toward the bank, that no easy task lay before him. Once in Mr. Crab-

tree's presence, Phil launched promptly into the business at hand. No matter how nervous he felt, he did not mean to let Mr. Crabtree know it.

"I am going to rebuild our house at once, Mr. Crabtree," he said. "We've got about fifteen hundred dollars, and we own the ground."

"Quite an undertakin'," said the old banker, darting a piercing look at the boy. "You'll soon eat up that fifteen hundred."

"That's what I came to see you about," said Phil. "I can build the house complete with three thousand dollars. I wanted to know if you would lend me the other fifteen hundred."

"Sure y'ain't bit off more'n y'can chew?" asked Mr. Crabtree.

"No, Mr. Crabtree," said Phil. "I am ready to tell Bill Small to start work at once if you will loan me the money. If I can't borrow the money I can't rebuild. Will you lend it to me?"

"Are you sure you can pay it back?" was

the banker's next question. Crabtree leaned back in his creaking chair and stared doubtfully at the boy with his cold gimlet-like eyes.

"Yes, sir," replied Phil. "I figure I can pay off the interest and the whole amount inside of two years."

Old Asa arose from his chair and walked out into the lobby of the bank. Whistling a little tune, he rippled the fingers of his right hand across his left one and pondered for a minute or two in deep thought, then he returned to Phil.

"You know what'll happen if you miss a payment, don't you?" he asked the boy.

"No, I don't know absolutely," said Phil.

"Well," said the old banker tartly, "all that'd happen would be that I'd take over the property!"

Phil was somewhat taken aback by the frigid tones of the banker, but he retained his composure and even smiled a bit.

"I don't intend to miss any payments," he assured the older man.

"All right then," was Asa's reply. "I'll take a chance and loan you the money."

As Phil was legally a minor in the eyes of the law, Mr. Crabtree told him that his mother would have to sign the necessary papers. Phil asked if he might have a day or two before this was done, as he planned to have Bill Small start erecting the new home at once and to keep the news a secret from Mrs. Hardy for a day or two. With the assurance of the loan, however, Phil lost no time in locating the village carpenter and striking a bargain with him. Mrs. Hardy had been paid the insurance money. This she turned over to Phil, and with the five hundred that he had he was able to pay Bill Small the necessary fifteen hundred dollars with which to begin the work. Phil, as we know, had six hundred dollars, but the other one hundred he spent in the purchase of necessary clothes for both himself and his mother. His sole capital, after paying for these essentials and the first payment down on the construction of the house, was

less than twenty dollars, but this did not disturb the boy because the future looked bright and promising. He had his new and splendid position with the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation; he had successfully negotiated a loan from Mr. Crabtree, and he felt absolutely capable of paying this back out of his earnings.

It was a great experience, therefore, several days later, for Phil to ask his mother if she would take a walk with him. Mrs. Stone had purposely asked Mrs. Hardy to change to another room in her home—a room from which she could not see the blackened ruins of the Hardy cottage. Mrs. Hardy had been so upset by the calamity of the destruction of her home that she had no desire to leave her room. When Phil, however, bought her a new supply of clothing and insisted that she accompany him for a short walk, she finally agreed.

"It's a beautiful day for a walk, Mother," said Phil diplomatically, "Let's go by the old place."

"Oh, Son," said Mrs. Hardy, "I just dread looking at it."

"No, you won't, Mother," said Phil. "I'm sure we'll be able to get started on the new place before the week is out."

Phil could hardly hide the excitement he felt. He was fully aware that Bill Small, aided by a crew of workmen, had that morning cleared away all of the débris and that already the cheery rat-tat-tat of hammers gave evidence that a new house was rising on the site of the old one—a new house that was far better in every way than its predecessor, because Phil was careful to see that every modern convenience and improvement possible was planned for the dwelling. As the boy and his mother walked along the shady street of the village toward their old homestead, and finally came abreast of it, Phil made no further effort to conceal his delight.

"Look, Mother!" he cried.

Mrs. Hardy looked, looked as best she could through the tears that blurred her

eyes, for there before her, rising almost as she stared in amazement and joy, were the bright new lumber posts and wooden frames Bill Small had already put in place.

"Oh, Phil!" was all that Mrs. Hardy was able to exclaim, as she raised her handkerchief to her eyes. Phil did not try to stop her weeping because he knew that it was from happiness and not sorrow.

"Bill Small has promised me that it will be ready for you to move into in less than a month," said Phil. "We are in wonderful luck because he happened to have a big supply of lumber on hand cut almost to measure for your new house, and that has saved us lots of time and lots of money. I've arranged for you to stay with Mrs. Stone until then, and now I'll tell you how I did it. With the insurance money and some money that I had, I was able to pay Bill Small enough to start work on it. Then I got a loan from Mr. Crabtree. You will have to sign that note for me because I am not twenty-one, but you won't have to worry

about paying for it; I'll look after that."

"Son," said Mrs. Hardy, "are you sure you haven't taken on too much responsibility just for me?"

"Don't you worry, Mother," Phil assured her, "I don't mind taking responsibility for you."

"I know, Son," continued his mother, "but they say Mr. Crabtree's an awful hard man where money is concerned."

A few more details in connection with the building of the house engaged Phil the next day or so, but with his mother happy and with her mind at ease, the boy thought of returning at once to the city. Mrs. Hardy had suggested that Phil write to Mr. Dennison, telling him of all that had transpired, but so many things had engrossed Phil's attention that he was unable to send the letter. He knew, however, that when he returned he would be able to explain everything to the shipping magnate. Phil remembered Mr. Dennison's deep concern and how the kindly man had told him to stay in Pleasanton as

long as was necessary to calm his mother's fears and this was the chief reason why Phil had not worried over his absence from the office. The next morning, though, both Phil and his mother were startled by the arrival of a telegram, addressed to him. Phil hurriedly opened the envelope containing the message and, upon reading the contents, gave a little whistle of astonishment. Turning to his mother and handing her the telegram, he said:

"This is a funny message to receive from Mr. Dennison." Mrs. Hardy read the paper. The message was from the city, addressed to Phil at Pleasanton, and was as follows:

WHAT IS DELAYING YOUR RETURN REPORT FOR WORK AT ONCE

SEVEN SEAS SHIPPING CORPORATION

"I don't think Mr. Dennison sent that message," said Mrs. Hardy. "His name isn't signed to it."

"No," agreed Phil, again reading the tele-

gram. "The Company's name is signed to it."

"Well, if Mr. Dennison didn't send it," said Mrs. Hardy, "I wouldn't worry about the message."

"But I don't know who sent it and that's what worries me," replied Phil. "Gee, that message makes me feel as though they all thought I was playing off from work and I don't believe that Mr. Dennison would ever think that."

Mrs. Hardy realized her son was worried about the message, however, and she did her best to dispel his doubts. Phil spent the remainder of the morning arranging details with his carpenter so that things would go along smoothly in his absence, then he hurriedly packed his bag that afternoon and caught the train to the city. Upon arrival, he went at once to the Healy home, where everyone was overjoyed to see him. His first night back was a long session. The entire Healy family, together with old Jason Royle, sat up until a late hour listening to

Phil's account of his adventures. He told them of his return to Pleasanton, and how his mother had been frightened by the strangers, of whom no trace had been found. He also described the mysterious fire that wiped out their home, and would have cost both his life and the life of his mother had not he fortunately awakened and detected the odor of smoke. He gave at great length his plans for rebuilding, and how overcome with joy Mrs. Hardy was when he surprised her by showing her the new house in process of construction.

"And we never did find out who the strangers were or how the fire started," Phil said. "There wasn't a single clue, unless it was this knife with the initials 'H. S.' on it. I found it near the cellar window next morning."

Phil produced the knife that he had discovered near the ruins of his home and passed it around to his interested listeners. Phil thought that he saw Jason suddenly start as he looked at it. The old cook put

on his spectacles so as to see more clearly and opened each blade to examine it carefully but returned it to the boy without a word. Later, though, when all had gone upstairs to bed after their exciting evening, Jason sought Phil out in his bedroom. Picking up the knife from Phil's table, where it lay, he said:

"Sonny, this here knife belonged to a seafarin' man, and did you ever stop to think that the initials on it are those of one Harvey Scott, otherwise known as Baldy?"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Phil.

"Now, I'm not sure it's his knife," said Jason hurriedly, "but it doesn't take a fool to put two and two together. Remember your mother's description about the stranger, and then you findin' this thing near the house? Sonny, sure as shark's fins I'm thinkin' that Baldy Scott and Ghost Hansen, if that there bleary-eyed devil is the one that was with him, have had something to do with the burning down of your house."

Old Jason was the picture of wrath as he

spoke and Phil, too, felt his own blood boil with anger as he wondered whether or not Baldy Scott and Ghost Hansen had, like two fiends in the night, purposely destroyed his mother's house and almost killed both his mother and himself. They talked about it to some length and then dropped into a long silence in which Phil seemed buried in thought. Old Jason watched him quietly for a while, then turning suddenly to the boy, said:

"Phil, you're worryin' about somethin'. You been worryin' about it all night. I c'd see that you were holdin' somethin' back when you were talkin' to the family down there." As Jason spoke, he jerked a blunt thumb downward in the direction of the living room of the Healy home.

"Why, Jason," protested Phil. "I'm not really worrying——"

"Now, now!" exploded the cook, "No 'ifs,' 'ands,' or 'buts' about it! Let's hear about it!"

Touched by the sympathetic understand-

ing of his loyal old companion, Phil could not resist. He admitted that Mr. Crabtree's manner when he loaned him the money and told him how failure to make a payment meant that the banker would take over the home, had worried him, but that most of all he was disturbed by the curt telegram ordering him back to work at once. Jason clicked his tongue to the roof of his mouth half a dozen times to show that this new development was puzzling to him also. And then, sensing the strain and the excitement under which Phil had been the past week and wishing to relieve the lad's mind so he would get a much needed night's rest, he suddenly became his jovial old self again. He leveled an admonishing finger at Phil, and ordered the boy to proceed at once to bed, forget all worry, and get a good night's sleep.

"If you sleep tight," promised Jason, "I'll let you know about a little s'prise in the mornin'. The fact is, I'll show you my place o' business. Since you left town, Jason Royle has had a grand opening of the

'Deep Water Tavern,' the best eatin' house there is to-day along the water front."

"Gee, that's splendid!" said Phil. "I'll be tickled to death to see it. Where is it and when did you open it?"

"We'll take that up in the mornin', my boy," said old Jason. "The place for you now is bed! Good night!

CHAPTER IV

PHIL MEETS DESMOND SKINNER

"Good morning, Mr. Perry," was Phil's greeting to the pompous little secretary who served Mr. Dennison, when he entered the anteroom of the shipping magnate's office the next morning. Phil felt more cheerful this morning after his sound sleep of the night before and more inclined to think he had worried unnecessarily over the curt telegram he had received from his office.

Perry, carefully removing his nose glasses and holding them disdainfully before him, surveyed Phil. It seemed to the boy that the pompous little man was in a threatening frame of mind and that Phil's appearance had kindled his anger to the boiling point.

"So you finally decided to come back, did you?" he asked after a long pause.

"I'm sorry I'm late," said Phil, "but I think Mr. Dennison will be satisfied with my explanation."

"You think so, do you?" asked Perry.

Phil was fully aware of the dry and snippy manner the pompous secretary employed; in fact, Phil felt that perhaps Perry was jealous of him because of the interest Mr. Dennison had taken in him. So with no desire to bandy words with the little man, Phil started toward his office. As he turned the knob the little man shouted:

"Keep out of that office! It's no longer yours!"

Phil wheeled in astonishment.

"What?" he cried.

"Yes," sneered Perry, "and I'll tell you something else too. You'll do no explaining to Mr. Dennison. He's no longer here."

Phil could hardly believe his ears at this announcement. He stared in amazement at the pompous little man who now sat lolling

back in his chair, sneering and enjoying to the full the boy's discomfiture. In surprise rather than anger, Phil stammered,

"Wh—wh—what has happened, Mr. Perry?"

"You seem quite worried, eh?"

"Worried?" said Phil shortly. "Of course I'm worried—tell me what's happened!" and to show Perry that he meant business, the boy swiftly crossed from the door to the desk behind which the secretary sat and, leaning slightly toward him, looked angrily at him. This startled Perry and he sat upright. The gloating look of triumph that his face had worn disappeared as if by magic, but as he spoke the sneer came back.

"Mr. Dennison's gone away on his yacht," said the secretary. "He'll be gone six months. He's had a nervous breakdown, and his doctors have forbidden him hearing from his office in any way. In the meantime Mr. Desmond Skinner is running the Company."

The name Desmond Skinner was new to

Phil Hardy and a faint wonder as to what sort of man had been chosen to act for Mr. Dennison during the latter's illness crossed his mind. He was not long in finding out. The secretary, who had now grown talkative, went on:

"And it was Mr. Skinner who wired you to return to work, and *at once.* Furthermore, I have been instructed to tell you that he doesn't want you to use the office that you've been using any longer——"

"Why not?" interrupted Phil.

"Simply because," snorted Perry, his face turning pink and his petty spite getting the better of him, "he has no need for an untrained boy like you around here. Mr. Skinner is a business man, not soft-hearted like Mr. Dennison was!"

The slam of the outer door echoed through the room, and Phil and the secretary looking around saw a man striding into the anteroom. He was a tall, rather heavy-set man, with jet black hair. His face was a mask, illuminated by two beady black

eyes, and across his upper lip was a wisp of a mustache, both ends of which were curled and waxed into fine black spears. Certainly he was not prepossessing. Assuredly, he was not kind-hearted. Grim determination and a trace of cruelty were the answer one got from his eyes. Terseness and a biting tone bespoke the two thin red lines that served as lips. As he approached, the obsequious secretary who had bustled out from behind his desk bowed low and reached for the newcomer's hat and cane.

"Good morning, Mr. Skinner," said Perry humbly.

With scarcely a glance at the secretary and none at all at Phil, Desmond Skinner walked into what had been Mr. Dennison's private office, flinging the following order over his shoulder as he passed:

"Boy, get a window pole and let some fresh air into my office."

Phil, being the only boy in sight, went over to a corner of the anteroom where the window pole reposed, and with it in hand

entered the private office. After he had lowered two of the windows and was preparing to return to the anteroom, Skinner looked up sharply from a paper he was reading and said:

"You the new office boy?"

"No, Mr. Skinner," replied Phil, "I am Phil Hardy."

"So-o-o-o," was the long-drawn-out ejaculation of Desmond Skinner. He sat forward in his chair and favored Phil with a cold look from his hard black eyes.

"You're Phil Hardy, are you? You've been away so long I thought you'd resigned."

"I can explain—" began Phil.

"Come now! Come now!" was Skinner's crisp rejoinder as he sat back in his chair again and resumed his reading. "No explanations! I will attend to your case later." And he waved his hand in dismissal.

That first day back at the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation was a wretched one for Phil Hardy. His own little office, of

which he had been so proud, was taken from him, and in the face of Desmond Skinner's unpleasant reception he hardly knew what the future held for him. Mr. Dennison, his best friend, was gone and according to Perry he would be absent for at least six months. If Perry, the secretary, had told the truth—and Phil believed he had—there was no possible chance or way to get into communication with Mr. Dennison. Without the latter, should Phil lose his position or experience any other misfortune, he might not be able to pay old Asa Crabtree as promptly as he had planned. These were the thoughts that ran through Phil's head when he left Desmond Skinner's office. He had no fear of his ability to take care of himself, but he knew that back in Pleasanton his mother depended upon him. She placed entire faith in him, and was content in believing, as Phil too had believed when he negotiated the loan from Asa Crabtree, that he would be able to more than meet his indebtedness notes as they came due and pay

off the sum he had borrowed. Phil, at Perry's instruction, had remained seated in the anteroom for perhaps an hour. No work had been given him and Perry paid no attention to him whatever. Finally the suspense was more than he could hear and he made up his mind to end it. Perry had left the room and no one was around.

"I might as well have it out now and find out where I stand," he said to himself, as he walked toward Desmond Skinner's office. He opened the door marked "Private," and saw Skinner seated at Mr. Dennison's old desk. The latter glanced at him.

"Mr. Skinner," began Phil as he paused just inside the door, "I wanted to tell you what delayed my return. My mother's house burned——"

That was as far as Phil got. In biting tones Skinner said coldly:

"I didn't ring for you."

"I know, sir, but——"

"Can you read?" asked Skinner, pointing to the door that bore the word "Private" thereon. Phil understood what he meant and started to speak but before he had an opportunity to utter a word the older man continued:

"Close the door—on the outside—and read the sign on it. And don't ever come in here again unless you're called!"

As the door closed behind poor Phil, Skinner rang twice. This was the signal for Perry, the secretary. The little man who meantime had returned bounced up like a rubber ball and almost ran into his chief's office.

"Lovely morning, isn't it?" asked Perry in lieu of something else to say.

"Never mind the morning," snapped Skinner. "Tell me, what is the Hardy boy's salary?"

"Mr. Dennison raised him from twelve dollars to eighteen a week when he came back," said Perry.

"What!" ejaculated Skinner. "Eighteen dollars a week to that half-baked country bumpkin?"

"I thought it was most excessive myself," said Perry, rubbing his hands together obsequiously.

"Well, that'll be changed, and changed quick!" was Skinner's reply. "I've other plans in mind for him, but let him hang around here for the rest of the week."

Phil waited in the anteroom after his dismissal from Skinner's office with never a word from either Skinner or Perry. Noontime came but nothing was said to him about a luncheon hour, so when both Skinner and Perry had left the office for the midday meal, Phil decided that he would do likewise. He ran for his cap, took the elevator to the street floor, and noted that it was then twelve-thirty o'clock. Phil felt miserably—the more so because of his uneasiness for the future and his inability to know what Skinner had in mind for him. He realized that his old position was gone,

gone forever perhaps. Indeed, he didn't even know whether he had a position any more. All morning they had let him sit idle in that outside office without telling him what his duties were to be and that looked ominous to Phil. It was a terrible blow for the boy, but if ever his stanch courage stood him in good stead it was now. Walking aimlessly in the crowded street below, Phil decided that he would seek the one friend to whom he could tell everything—old Jason Royle.

"It won't take more than ten minutes to run down to the water front," said Phil to himself, "and I can eat lunch at Jason's tavern."

Through little side streets and back alleyways, Phil was soon at the water front. At his left was the river and the long gray warehouses of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. The noon-day lull was on, but here and there wagons rumbled over the cobblestones and Phil caught the tang of the salt air blown in from the sea. Almost

before he knew it, he was in front of Jason's enterprise. The chubby cook had reason to be proud of what he had done. The old building, which Phil remembered as a disreputable, ramshackle structure, had been bathed, it seemed, in glistening white paint. A neat little curtain across a glass window gave evidence of the cleanliness within, and emblazoned over the doorway as well as the window, in letters nearly a foot high, were the words: "Deep Water Tavern." Beneath this, in letters almost as large, Phil read: "Jason Royle, Proprietor." And at the corner of the window was still another card which carried the cheering information: "Hot Food for All."

Phil opened the door and was struck at once with the spotlessness of Jason's tavern. From his place of vantage in the doorway Phil was able to survey the entire interior. There was a long counter before which were stools. Against the other wall were a series of neat little tables and chairs. Everything that Phil saw shone with clean-

liness. Indeed, the Deep Water Tavern was all that the most inviting restaurant could be, the boy thought, and he was deeply proud of the old cook's achievement. When Phil was spied by Jason, proud as a peacock behind the counter, arrayed in white vestments complete even to the chef's cap that perched on top of his head, the old cook darted from behind the counter and stretched out both hands in hearty greeting.

"Sonny!" boomed Jason. "Welcome to Deep Water Tavern! Take a seat!"

Phil drew up alongside the counter and smiled back at Jason. Toward the rear of the room Phil saw a Chinaman busily engaged over a great range.

"Hip Sing's going to cook the best things in the house for you, right now," said Jason, peering closely at Phil. "And let me tell you one thing, Sonny; with a Jason Royle steak amidships, you'll go right out o' here and lick the world!"

There was something so infectious about Jason's merriment that for a moment Phil

forgot his own troubles. With a twinkle in his eye, Phil turned to Jason and said with every evidence of seriousness:

"I see you're letting someone else do the cooking here."

"Why, er, er," stammered Jason in a really embarrassed fashion, " 'course I stand over him, so it's really my vittles that's served the customers, and between the two of us, we turn out jest about the best meat 'n 'taties in town!"

Phil was ready to agree entirely with Jason and to approve absolutely the manner in which the Deep Water Tavern was operated when he had completed the demolition of the great steak and heaping plate of potatoes the old cook placed before him.

"Golly!" exclaimed Phil as he laid down his knife and fork. "You and Hip Sing certainly know how to cook food! I feel better already."

" 'Course you do," replied Jason. "When you came in here I knew somethin' had happened but I figgered it best to let

you take aboard a cargo of food before I asked any questions. Come now, let's have it!"

The little restaurant was now deserted. Even the Chinese cook was absent, having been sent out on an errand by Jason. Phil, accordingly, had no hesitancy in laying bare to the old cook the peculiar events of the morning, and the reception he had been tendered when he arrived at the offices of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. He described Desmond Skinner and how that worthy had treated him.

Jason listened intently but before Phil was a quarter of the way through his narrative, a flush of angry color surged into Jason's face and remained there during all the period Phil told his story.

"It's an outrage!" declared Jason, bringing his great heavy hand down on the counter with a resounding smack for further emphasis. "Do you really suppose Mr. Dennison's sick?"

"Yes, I do," said Phil.

"Well," said Jason savagely, "I'd like nothin' better'n t' see that Skinner plumb in the middle o' my hottest fryin' pan. What business had he," continued Jason, "to treat you like he has? Anyone would think you had'n had the right to go to Pleasanton and help your mother. I'd bet anythin' that if Mr. Dennison were here, he'd make this Skinner play another tune!"

"I bet he would too," declared the boy earnestly.

At last Phil, mindful of the time that he had left the office, looked at the clock and saw that in ten minutes an hour would have elapsed since he had left the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation building. He presumed he was entitled to an hour for luncheon, but as he did not wish to exceed that time limit, especially under the precarious conditions, he bade Jason a hurried farewell and started back to the office. When he arrived, Perry, the supercilious secretary, looked at him inquiringly and said:

"Where on earth have you been? Mr.

Skinner has been looking all over for you."

"I was at lunch," said Phil.

"Humph," snorted Perry. "You were gone long enough!"

"I left at half-past twelve and it isn't yet quite half-past one," said Phil looking at the clock on the wall. "What does Mr. Skinner want? Do you know?"

"Yes, I know," said Perry with a sly smile. "But you'll find out soon enough when you see Mr. Skinner. In fact, he asked me to tell you—if you ever came back—to come at once to his office." There was something ominous in the little secretary's manner and Phil sensed an unpleasant session with Desmond Skinner. He went directly, however, to the door of Mr. Dennison's old office, rapped on it once, then opened it and entered. Desmond Skinner, looking for all the world like a huge spider, sat in Mr. Dennison's chair. He glanced with a scowl at Phil as the boy stood respectfully before him.

"I don't know where you're in the habit

of hiding yourself, young man," he began, "but an hour ago, when I wanted you, you were nowhere to be found."

"I was out to lunch, Mr. Skinner," began Phil, "and——"

"Never mind—no explanations are necessary," cut in Skinner. "When I first saw you, young man, I realized that you would not fit in so far as office work was concerned. I've decided that it's best for you to return to your old job at the warehouse. Your salary will be what it was—twelve dollars a week. That's all to-day."

Phil received this information, disastrous as it was to his plans and hopes, without flinching. He realized how futile it would be to argue with Desmond Skinner because he sensed to the full the hostility against him in the other's mind. Phil could not explain this hostility. He knew nothing of Desmond Skinner; in fact he had never seen the man before and so far as he could remember Mr. Dennison had never men-

tioned his name. There was only one thing, therefore, for the boy to do. Silently he turned on his heel, and walked out of the office and went direct to the warehouse. There the first man he met was Pat Cleary who had been acting as foreman since Gore disappeared. Pat's honest face was a huge question mark as he spied Phil.

"Phil, me boy, whatever're ye doin' down here?"

"I've come back to work, Pat," said Phil.

"Don't be kiddin'," was Pat's answer.

"Honor bright, Pat," Phil assured him. And in a few words Phil sketched to his friend the story of his sudden turn in luck and how Desmond Skinner had banished him to the warehouse.

Pat reacted in much the same way as had Jason—he was angry, furiously so.

"So that's the way Skinner treated ye?" asked Pat. "Well, he's the big boss, but I'll tell ye now he's no good. The company got him from some other of their offices to

sit in while Mr. Dennison's away. Cheer up, Phil, I'm the foreman here now and ye've got one friend!"

That same afternoon, as Phil, like a good soldier, tackled with energy the many tasks at the warehouse, a short, stubby man, with a two-days' growth of beard on his face, opened the door of the anteroom of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation and impudently swaggered in. A crumpled old hat was pulled down almost over his eyes but not too far to obscure entirely his beetling brows. His clothes were ragged and dirty, and he puffed away at half of a foul-smelling cigar. Hat on and his cigar reeking its rancid smoke, he strode up to Perry, the secretary.

"Is Skinner in?" he asked abruptly.

The little secretary regarded the newcomer with evident distaste. Drawing himself up to his full height, and by comparison he towered over the other man, Perry said icily:

"You mean *Mr.* Skinner?"

"Listen, sister," shot back the other. "I said 'Skinner.' You make tracks with those little tootsies of yours into his office, see? Tell him the Runt's out here."

There was something so menacing and cocksure in the stranger's manner that Perry plainly was intimidated. Summoning up enough courage, however, to emit a sniff of disdain, the secretary turned on his heel and entered Skinner's office.

"Mr. Skinner," he announced. "A very disreputable-looking man wishes to see you; in fact, demands to."

"Who is it?" asked Skinner.

"Why, he says he's the Runt," replied Perry.

These words had an electrical effect on Skinner. He jumped from his chair and approached the secretary.

"Send him in," he instructed Perry, "and if anyone else comes in to see me this afternoon, you say I'm out for the day."

CHAPTER V

THE SHACK IN THE SWAMP

FAR to the north of the city, along a wild and desolate stretch of the coast, the sea crooked a bent and jagged finger. In the inlet thus made was Skeleton Bay. Mariners shunned the dangerous water as much as landsmen avoided the swampy, heavily wooded country around the bay. It was a dreary and forbidding spot. Deep in the swamp, on a hummock of rising ground, stood a sinister, tumbled-down shack. A wisp of smoke, from the dwelling's sole chimney, was the only sign of life, yet within the hovel seated around a table, drinking and playing cards, were three men. These three anxiously awaited the arrival of a fourth, and the fourth man at

that moment was seated in the office of Desmond Skinner, the directing head, for the time being, of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. He was the Runt, expostulating with Skinner because in order to see the latter he had been obliged to request admission from a secretary.

"What's the idea of all the up-stage stuff?" he asked Skinner angrily, as he approached the desk and took the chair opposite.

"Listen, you fool," replied Skinner. "Do you want to spoil everything? 'Course I have to have a secretary here. This is an office. As soon as I learned you were outside you got in, didn't you? If you act like this you'll ruin everything!"

"Who? Me?" asked the Runt in astonishment, glaring fiercely at the other. "Where'd y' git that idea? Did y'ever hear of the Runt spillin' the beans or framin' a pal?"

"No, of course not," said Skinner hastily in low, muffled tones, extending a box of ci-

gars toward the other. "But you must be more careful. What's the news?"

"Nothin' much," was the Runt's response, as he lighted a fresh cigar, and leaned back with outstretched legs, completely at his ease now that he saw he had made Skinner uncomfortable. "Four Egg's up at the Bay. He's got two pals with him and the boys need a little dough."

"Oh, all right!" said Skinner quickly reaching into his pockets and producing a roll of bills, which he handed to the Runt, who in turn stuffed it into his pocket, "take this and keep me posted. When did the others reach the Bay?"

"The Ghost and Baldy got in two nights ago," was the Runt's reply. After a short, low-toned conversation during which Skinner seemed to grow uneasy as the Runt became more confident, the latter arose and left the office.

The Runt's impudent swagger was more pronounced than ever as he strode out of Desmond Skinner's office, past Perry, and

finally reached the street. He proceeded, with his peculiar, rolling walk, down side streets and alleyways, in the direction of the water front. When he reached the street that led to the great gray warehouses of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation, he halted, and his eyes happening to light on the sign of the Deep Water Tavern he turned and made his way there. Work had ceased at the warehouse and Phil, having arrived at the Tavern before Jason was ready to leave, was conversing with him, awaiting the time when the latter could accompany him to the Healy home, when the door opened and the Runt rolled in. Jason left Phil and walked over to the newcomer.

"What'll it be, sir?" asked Jason.

"Grub, Cookie, and lots of it," said the other shortly.

"That's the kind of order we like, Skipper," was Jason's cheerful rejoinder. "Seafarin' man, ain't you?"

"Say, Cookie," was the stranger's reply, in terse, tart language. "Y'ain't happy till

y' come snoopin' 'round in a man's business, are you? Well, bring on some grub and save your gab for the next customer."

Jason, with an angry look in his eyes, said a few words to Hip Sing and returned to Phil's side. Phil could see that the old cook was having a hard time to keep his temper in check. However, Jason said nothing but permitted Hip Sing, the Chinese cook, to serve the customer. When the latter had completed his meal he turned once more to Jason and asked:

"All right, Cookie; what's the tariff?"

"Sixty cents," said Jason with asperity.

"Fair enough," said the other, with an attempt at geniality, "can you change a twenty?"

At this he produced a large roll of bills, peeled off a twenty and handed it to Jason. Jason made change for him without a word and he walked out of the restaurant with never a look to the right or left. Phil, who had been a silent witness to everything,

turned to Jason when the man had shut the door.

"Gee, Jason!" the boy exclaimed. "He's a strange one, isn't he? Ragged clothes, lots of money and a mean disposition!"

"Sonny," began the cook, his eyes intent on the retreating figure of the stranger. "Old Jason never forgets a face. He's seen that terrier afore. Now, bless me, where was it?"

Jason had forgotten his anger at the stranger's impudence in his efforts to recapture an elusive memory.

Phil caught another glimpse of the stranger the next day when he was at work at the warehouse. The little, evil-looking man was seated on a coil of rope, smoking a cigar in defiance of the "No Smoking" signs posted in the warehouse and when Phil passed him he called out to the boy.

"Say," he began. "Weren't you at that eatin' house last night?"

"Yes," said Phil, stopping.

"Then mebbe ye c'n tell me the name o' that gas-bag of a cook?" asked the other.

"I can tell you that his name is Jason Royle, and I can also tell you, and will," said Phil crisply, "that he's not a gas-bag!"

"Must be a friend o' yourn," said the other.

"You bet he's a friend of mine," said Phil heartily.

"Oh, well," replied the little man in apologetic tones. "No harm meant. Don't get sore."

But as Phil moved on in pursuit of his duties, the stranger shot a vicious look at him and said to himself:

"I'd like to wring that sparrow's neck. Got the name of the cook out of him, though, 'n' that's what I was after. So it's Jason Royle, blast him. I'm safe, though, 'cause he didn't recognize me!" There was something so sinister to Phil about the squat stranger that he could not dispel the thought of him from his mind. As soon as the Runt had left Phil sought Pat and de-

scribed completely the stranger to him, thinking that he might know who he was inasmuch as the odd-looking man seemed to be familiar with the warehouse. Phil led Pat to the doorway on the chance he might still be in sight, and as luck would have it, the Runt could be seen rolling away down the street.

"Phil, me boy," said Pat excitedly as he eagerly scanned the disappearing figure, "I've seen that half-pint before! Hangin' 'round, was he?"

"He was around here yesterday and again to-day," said Phil.

"Lad," said Pat. "I'm sure I know him. I ain't seen him for years, but I couldn't mistake that funny-lookin' figger! His name's—his name's—oh, where's me mimory gone? Give me time, though, and I'll think of it."

But Pat had not recalled the name before Phil had still another meeting with the stranger. It was that same evening, just at the close of work. Everyone in Phil's de-

partment had left but Phil and as he was busying himself with a few odds and ends while he waited for Jason so that they might go home together, the little man appeared at the door of the warehouse, and beckoned to him. Phil walked toward him and the Runt said:

"Boy, I'd like a word with you."

"Well?" asked Phil.

"You've got spunk and I like that," said the Runt, making an effort to smile agreeably at the same time, "and you stick up for your friends. Do you want to earn an honest penny?"

"Doing what?" asked Phil, at once suspicious.

"Give me a hand with this grip," explained the other, pointing to a large suitcase beside him, "I'll put you in the way to make one hundred dollars."

"Hold on," was Phil's reply. "I've got to know more about the job."

By way of reply, the Runt looked at Phil admiringly and said:

"You're quick as a whip, lad, and that's what Bill Betts likes."

"All right," agreed Phil. "What's your proposition, Mr. Betts?"

"I'm ridin' north in an hour," was the Runt's reply, "and I want company, 'cause I'm carryin' a lot o' money with me an' I'm more likely to be held up if I'm alone. Will you make the trip with me—for the hundred? I'll be two hours goin' and two hours returnin,' and here's the hundred."

The little man again produced the big roll of bills and counted out five twenties hurriedly. The money was a temptation to Phil—more than a temptation, in fact, because at his present rate of pay it represented more than eight weeks' wages. Phil, as we know, was in desperate need of money at this time, because within six months he would have to meet the other payment on his mother's home and he was beginning to wonder how he would do it on his reduced income. The boy was frankly dubious as to the character of the man before him and

wished that he had been given time to talk over the proposition with Jason or Officer Healy or even Pat before he decided what to do, yet the five crisp bills that the Runt held out and offered to give him in advance prompted Phil to agree to accept.

"One hundred dollars will help a lot," he said to himself.

"I'll go," he said finally aloud, "but you needn't pay me until we come back."

"I knew you'd go with me," said the Runt jovially, returning the money to his pocket. "Now you wait here just a minute, and I'll be along with a car."

He hardly gave Phil time to ponder further over the strange offer when he drew up beside the boy in a long, low, trim motor car. Phil got in beside him, the Runt stepped on the accelerator and they were off.

" 'Soon's we get out of town," he said to Phil, "we'll put on full speed ahead."

"That'll suit me," replied Phil. "I'd like to get back early."

While Phil and the Runt struck the open country road in their speeding car and Phil noticed the speedometer registering better than fifty miles an hour, Pat Cleary and Jason were deep in conversation in the latter's clean little restaurant.

"Anything else, Pat?" asked Jason, as the Irish foreman downed his second cup of excellent coffee.

"No, Jason," replied Pat, "except Phil's been tellin' me about a midget askin' him a lot o' questions about ye. He's got a nickname—hold on now—I' been teasin' meself to remember it this long while—The Rat! No, that's not it—"

"I know, Pat," exclaimed Jason, "It's the Runt! I've been rackin' my brains over what the name was they called him ever since he came to this place. It finally came to me sudden!"

"That's it!" confirmed Pat excitedly. "He's a pal o' Four Egg's, too! I mind it all now. I've seen that rascal in Gore's company many a time and I'm tellin' you,

Jason, them that hang out with Gore are up to no good!"

Jason, with a look of apprehension, took up the conversation and continued:

"The Runt's a bad one, Pat. I sailed with him twenty year ago and he was a bad one then. Wonder what he's doin' 'round here. We'll get a line on him, but don't tell Phil about him yet. The poor lad's got enough to worry him as 'tis!"

With Jason deep in thought trying to piece together fragments of memory of the Runt that extended back more than twenty years, Pat retraced his steps to the warehouse. He noticed Phil was absent, yet as it was past quitting time he thought of course the boy had gone home. Just to make sure, however, Pat asked two of the workmen in evidence if Phil were still around.

"No, Boss," said one of the men. "Soon after the whistle blew, he went away with that little bird who's been hangin' 'round."

Pat received this news with amazement. He turned and ran back to Jason's restau-

rant, and swinging open the door with a bang, he announced:

"Oh, Jason! Phil's gone off with the Runt!"

Jason received this news by dropping two plates to the floor.

"Save us!" was the cook's cry. "The poor lad's been trapped!"

Meantime the time had sped by, and Phil and his companion, aboard the speeding automobile, were now in a wild and desolate country. Phil had noticed the absence of houses and how the road some miles back had left off from the broad concrete highway into a dusty, winding country lane. There had been no diminution, however, in the speed of the car, and Phil could not help but admire the driving skill of the little man beside him. There had been almost no conversation so far, as the speed was too swift for such and the driver seemed to be devoting his entire attention to the road and to getting all the power he could out of the motor. The road now led into a deep for-

est and the twilight through which they had traveled for the past half hour, was now made well-nigh darkness by the shade of the great trees. Just as Phil was wondering how much longer the trip would take, the car sped over a little board bridge that rattled beneath it and was brought to a grinding stop.

"Now you stay here and watch the car," said the Runt to Phil. He reached in the tonneau and lifted out the two suitcases. "I don't need no help with these grips," he said.

Phil saw the little man pick up a scarcely defined path through the woods and start off. A hundred or more paces away from the car the Runt turned and peered through the gloom. He saw Phil's silhouette in the gloaming, and with a rasping chuckle he said inaudibly:

"Wonder what Four Egg'll say when he finds I've bagged that sparrow for him?"

Phil Hardy's suspicions of the little man had not been allayed by his silence during

the trip and by the character of the country through which they had come. Indeed, more than once on the wild drive Phil wondered if he had not been guilty of folly in accepting the offer. And now his companion had gone off into the gloom of the forest, leaving him alone in the car! He hardly knew what to do.

"He hired me," Phil argued mentally, "to come with him to keep him from being robbed. Now he's gone off and left me. If he's robbed now, he might say I didn't carry out my part of the bargain so I think I'd better follow him. I reckon it's safe to leave the car. I don't think anybody will steal it away out here."

It was not alone Phil Hardy's desire to do the right thing by this man who had made a bargain with him but his suspicions of the fellow were making him unconsciously desirous of following him.

With his decision made, Phil slipped out of the car and picked up the trail into the swampy forest. Running silently along the

path Phil finally spied his companion about twenty rods ahead. All the boy wanted to do was to keep him in sight, and in this he was successful because while the gloom was intense now, still Phil could pick him out as a moving figure and yet even though the Runt turned once or twice and stared back into the darkness, he was unable to see Phil, for the boy was bent low and the foliage and bushes effectually hid him. Several times Phil felt his feet sink down in the boggy land but he never lost sight of the squat little figure that waddled along ahead of him. The ground was rising now and firmer, and a great fiery full moon could be seen creeping over the tree tops. On a diminutive hill Phil came at last to a clearing and there, from behind the shelter of a tree, he saw a ramshackle hut in the distance and that the Runt was proceeding to its door.

"Wish I was near enough to see who opens the door for him," said Phil to himself.

Realizing, though, that he had watched his companion to his destination, Phil was about to return to the car as the Runt entered the cabin. At that moment came the boisterous welcome of the inmates and the harsh gloating laughter that Phil at once recognized as the voice of "Four Egg" Gore. The sounds startled him as he paused at the edge of the clearing.

"Golly!" exclaimed Phil, cold perspiration breaking out on his face and body. "That was Gore and no mistake! I'm going to creep up to that cabin and find out what's going on."

Phil Hardy left the edge of the clearing and silently crept toward the shack after the Runt had entered. He could hear him being greeted noisily. The walls of the dilapidated house were so thin and the cracks around the windows so plentiful that he could hear almost every word that was spoken. "Four Egg" Gore, his great hairy arm around the newcomer's shoulder, led

him in triumph to "Ghost" Hansen and Baldy Scott.

"Here's a surprise, mates!" shouted Gore. "Bill Betts!"

"Bill Betts!" echoed the Ghost, extending his good right hand in welcome.

"Strike me dead if it ain't the Runt!" was Baldy Scott's ejaculation.

"What's in the grips, Bill?" asked Gore, pointing to the suitcases which the Runt had deposited upon the floor when he entered.

"A little present from Desmond," was the Runt's reply. "Some dough for you and the boys here."

Phil reached one of the windows of the hovel where he could see all who were within. He was careful, however, to keep himself where the light from the room could not fall upon him. He heard the Runt say:

"Skinner says that all we've got to do is to lay low for a bit. All's well elseways."

"Can we count on Skinner?" asked the Ghost suspiciously.

HE SAW A RAMSHACKLE HUT IN THE DISTANCE.

Phil Hardy s Triumph. *Page* 94

The Runt turned with a grin to Gore, and the other answered him with huge laughter.

"That's a good one, ain't it, Sim?" asked the Runt. "Skinner's been a pal of ours for years!"

"Whew!" said Phil to himself as he saw the four outlaws and heard their every word. "It's the whole gang and Skinner's one of them! No wonder he wanted to get rid of me!"

Phil realized the peril in which he was placed by remaining near the shack which housed the outlaws but he sturdily held his position of vantage near the window while they talked on. Gore produced several black bottles and poured out drinks for each of the quartet but the Runt continued to be the center of attention.

"Now, mates," he said, "I'll be back in a day or so, and so long as Desmond is sittin' in for old man Dennison, everything's shipshape, but now I've got some news for you."

"News! What news?" asked Gore.

"Not so fast, Sim. Not so fast," was the Runt's reply, reaching for the black bottle. "We'll have one more round, and I'll tell you then."

Caution and a strange inner consciousness of danger urged Phil Hardy to leave his place of peril but the necessity of learning the outlaws' plans still held him at the lighted window. At the Runt's next words, however, Phil stood transfixed with terror.

"Well, I brought a friend with me tonight," the Runt went on. "He's waitin' for me at the car. You all know him and might want to see him—a whipper-snapper of a kid—Phil Hardy!"

At these words "Four Egg" Gore leaped up in excitement and overturned the table. Both Hansen and Scott screamed oaths.

"The Squirt!" squealed Gore. "Where."

"Follow me, mates," was the Runt's reply, as he opened the door, and the three hastened after him. Fortunately for Phil the door was on the opposite side of the shack from the window where he stood and

he remained, trembling in the darkness, while the four ruffians proceeded through the woods in the direction of the automobile. In a moment, however, Phil regained his composure, and darted off toward the swamp.

"If they ever catch me, I'm a goner," he said. While Phil had been engaged in his eavesdropping at the hovel, a young moon had made its appearance in the sky but its pale light was not of much assistance to him in the tangled underbrush and boggy bottom in which he soon found himself. At times he plunged into stagnant pools of water as he felt his way through the murky marshes; then again he stumbled over dry hummocks of grass as he crept along on his hands and knees. Phil knew that his only chance of escape was to regain the road, so he tried to retain his sense of direction. Here, indeed, his training as a country boy versed in the ways of the woods, served him in good stead. After a long and circuitous journey, Phil found himself near a clump of bushes close

by the winding lane. He drew a long breath and stood upright for a moment, but he decided to listen and get his bearings before he ventured forth any farther. At that moment he heard angry voices and caught the flash of an automobile's headlights. Phil swiftly dropped down in the underbrush, and crouched there, his heart beating fast in thankfulness that he had paused before going on. The voices grew louder and Phil knew that the four men were drawing near. He heard Gore, his every word intermingled with an oath, denouncing the evil fortune that had prevented him from laying his hands on the "Squirt."

"Calm down, Sim! Calm down!" Phil heard the Runt say. "The Kid's got tired waiting and started back to town. Maybe he got scared. You needn't worry, though."

"You're sure he didn't know we're hid out here?" asked Gore.

"Naw," was the Runt's assurance. "How could he? You and the Ghost and Baldy go

back to the shack and don't worry. I'll be back to-morrow."

With which he put his foot on the starter and above its loud purr, Phil heard the others bid noisy farewells to the Runt, and by the light of the moon saw them turn and reenter the swamp. The boy realized that it was a good forty miles back to the city and he knew he could never make it on foot that night. How to get back to town, therefore, was the question. The answer popped into his mind when he heard the Runt step on the self-starter and caught the ensuing roar of the motor. The car, Phil remembered, bore a spare tire in the rear and also a heavy steel bumper. Phil recalled that many times he had seen urchins in the city obtain clandestine rides by curling against the spare tire, supported by the bumper, and hanging on for dear life. Meantime the Runt's car was in motion, and crawling along in low speed as it reached the clump of bushes which hid Phil. With a crashing

of gears the Runt changed to second speed just then, and Phil, alert and taking advantage of the noise thus made, leaped from his hiding place and caught on to the rear tire as the Runt once more shifted, this time to high, and the heavy car lurched forward. It was a precarious perch, but the roar of the motor effectively drowned any noise that Phil might have made in his lunge from the bushes and, tightening his hold on the spare tire and propping his feet more securely against the bumper, he made ready for his long and dangerous ride back to the city. Luck was with him this time in his escape from the gang at Skeleton Bay.

CHAPTER VI

OFFICER HEALY GETS BUSY

It was past midnight when the speeding car bearing the Runt and with Phil clinging desperately to the rear spare tire bore down on the outskirts of the city. Many times during the long and recklessly driven ride Phil had thought his strength would give out and that he would have to release his hold on the tire, but a life cleanly led that made his strength endure and the courage he possessed were the two things that enabled him to hang on. The Runt lessened the speed of the motor as he entered the center of the city. Because of the lateness of the hour, few pedestrians were about and no one of these who perhaps saw Phil thought any more of the sight than they would have of any other youngster "steal-

ing'' a ride. But by this time the boy was past caring whether or not anyone saw him. All of his mind was concentrated in an effort to seize the first chance to get off the car. A policeman, at a distant corner, caused the Runt to further reduce his pace and this gave Phil his opportunity. He dropped from the car as the Runt slowed down to swing around a corner and the latter, as ignorant of the departure of his passenger as he was of having one at all, sped away.

Poor Phil! His legs had been so cramped by the hours he had spent hunched against the extra tire of the car, and propped against the rear bumper, that they refused absolutely to respond when he released his hold. He fell with a thud to the hard pavement, rolling over once or twice and lay for some moments at full length on the street. Finally, with the aid of his hands, he was able to restore the circulation to his legs. He sat upright first, rubbing his lower limbs vigorously. Then, gingerly, he tried to

arise. Wobbling unsteadily he thumped his right foot against the asphalt, then his left. The returning circulation caused him acute pain but he kept up this process for some minutes until his legs bore him without collapsing, then he walked wearily up the street. No one had seen him evidently, and he considered this fortunate. A corner lamp-post told him where he was—some two miles from the Healy home, and Phil started toward it at once.

Phil was dead tired as he tramped the deserted streets, but motion was welcome after his hours of numbness and with every step his spirits revived. He had already figured out his next move. He meant to arouse Officer Healy at once, inform him of the presence of "Four Egg" Gore and his evil confederates at Skeleton Bay and tell him exactly of the conversations he had overheard that involved Desmond Skinner as one of the gang, so that the police could move immediately on the desperadoes.

"If Mr. Dennison were only here now so

I could tell him everything, too," thought Phil as he made his way to the Healy doorstep. He noticed that a light was shining from the parlor windows and as he was speculating about it, a near-by church chime softly announced that it was two o'clock. He could not understand the parlor light burning at that hour but he was relieved to think somebody was up, for he had feared he would have to arouse some member of the family as he lacked a key. But as he reached the front door it swung noiselessly open and there stood Jason. The old cook's expression was a mixture of joy and anger as he looked at the boy, but the anger soon disappeared and was replaced by the familiar beaming smile.

"Phil!" exclaimed Jason excitedly, "thank the good Lord for returnin' you safe and sound! Not a wink have I been able to sleep this night, worryin' and frettin' about you. I stood it as long as I could tossin' from one side to t'other of my bed, then I came below to watch from here, and

when I heard your footsteps climbin' those stairs, I didn't know whether I'd have strength enough to get to the door and let you in. Now tell me, Sonny; you went off with the worst man in the world—bar none. What's happened to you?"

"Nothing, Jason, thank goodness!" said Phil gratefully, "but most anything could have happened. Where's Mr. Healy?"

"Not home to-night," was the old cook's response. "He went on night duty, you know, beginnin' this evening."

"Golly, that's right," declared Phil. "I'd forgotten about it."

Now that he had seen Phil and knew that the boy was unhurt, Jason's indignant expression returned.

"What I want to know now," began the old cook, "is why you up and scooted away with that ruffian, the Runt, without tellin' me about it! That's a fine way to treat an old friend, I must say!"

"Oh, Jason," said Phil placatingly, "you'll forgive me when I tell you the whole

story, but first we've got to get to the police."

"At this hour of the night?" questioned Jason. "Do you realize that three o'clock will be here pretty soon. We've been jabberin' away like a coupla old gossips and you haven't told me anything! And, anyway, Mr. Healy will be home by four. Can't you wait till then?"

Phil realized that his story might sound wild and preposterous to anyone save Officer Healy, who knew him, and also knew about Gore, "Ghost" Hansen and the rest of the gang, so without further ado he agreed with Jason, and then told his old friend of the wild occurrences of the night. Seated close to one another in the little parlor of the Healy home, Phil, in low and suppressed tones told Jason why he had accepted the Runt's offer, how he became suspicious when they reached the Skeleton Bay country and how his suspicions were confirmed by what he witnessed there. Jason could hardly restrain his excitement as Phil

unfolded the story. The usual good nature that was such a part of the chubby cook disappeared as if by magic and a red flush of anger crept into his face. Finally he exploded.

"The fiends!" he cried savagely, clenching his fists. "And Desmond Skinner is their leader. Everything's clear to me now. Ah, Phil, what a fool I've been!"

"Why, Jason?" asked Phil in a surprised tone.

"It's all my fault," went on the other mournfully. "You'd never gone with the Runt if it hadn't been for the money he offered you and because you needed the money worse than anything in the world and——"

"But what's that got to do with you?" inquired Phil.

"What's it got to do with me?" said Jason angrily. "Well, it's got everything to do with me. If I hadn't been seventeen kinds of an idiot and put all of my money in that eatin' house down by the wharf, you'd never been worried about money. I could

have let you have whatever you needed to pay for your mother's home. Now I'm caught with the eatin' house and you're caught short of money to pay for the home!"

"Why, Jason," interrupted Phil. The generous spirit of the old cook was so fine, so splendid, that Phil's emotions almost got the better of him. There sat Jason before him, a disconsolate picture, grieving because of his inability to help a friend. Real friendship is so rare and fleeting that Phil realized again how deeply he was indebted to Jason for his affection and loyalty. "You mustn't talk like that, Jason," he continued huskily.

"I must and I will!" was Jason's response. "I'm jest a dodderin' old idiot, that's what I am, but, Sonny, jest as sure as sharks' fins we're goin' to find a way out o' this!"

"You bet we are," was Phil's cheerful answer. "They haven't got us licked yet, have they?"

Jason's reply was halted by the sounds of footsteps on the porch. Both Phil and Jason glanced at the clock and to their amazement realized that four o'clock had come and gone while they had talked. The door opened and Officer Healy entered. His ruddy, honest face was a huge question mark as he saw both Phil and Jason before him.

"What in the name of the saints are ye two doin' at this time of the mornin'? Tellin' bedtime stories to each other?" were the first questions he popped at them. Then noticing the serious expression on their faces he, in turn, became thoughtful and asked:

"What's up, boys? Anything bad?"

For the next thirty minutes Phil told the police officer everything that he had previously told Jason. Healy was tremendously excited, even more so than Jason had been. He arose from his chair and paced the floor and finally, as Phil concluded, he said:

"There'll be no sleep for me to-night, or mornin', I should say. I'm goin' right down to headquarters. The rifle squad's on duty all night. If we run out to the Bay before daybreak, we may land them birds. Now then, you and Jason get upstairs and try to get a little sleep. I'll have no need of either of you until later. Off with ye, now, to the bedcovers!"

Admonishing Phil and Jason to tell Mary, his wife, what his mission was, and for her not to worry if he were hours late in returning home, Officer Healy turned and left the house. Phil, by this time almost dead with fatigue, was happy at the chance of bed. His body was so tired that his brain seemed overly active and he thought he would not be able to sleep a wink, but no sooner had his head touched his pillow than he was off into a dreamless slumber.

Pat Healy lost no time in reaching headquarters and imparting the startling information he had acquired to his superiors. At his own request he was permitted to ac-

company the rifle squad to the Skeleton Bay country and before dawn had broken the police motor, a huge car of great speed, was roaring along the deserted highway toward the desolate and deserted stretch of swamp, forest and coast many miles to the north. Healy, guided by Phil's directions, led the posse through the thick woods to the little clearing in which stood the dilapidated old shack. Yet success was not to crown their efforts at once. Some hours before the arrival of the police, "Four Egg" Gore had tossed an empty whisky bottle through the opened window. He turned to "Ghost" Hansen and "Baldy" Scott.

"Let's clear out o' here," was his peremptory order. "I'm thinkin' about that little sneak, and we'd better break for cover."

Gore's leadership was never questioned so the "Ghost" and "Baldy," though not without muttered grumbling, quickly arose and followed him from the rickety house. They made their way to the shore where a tiny stretch of beach, from which jutted a

dilapidated pier, lay white and solitary in the moonlight. Tied to the pier was a small boat equipped with a gasoline engine. In the fleeting light of the moon, "Four Egg" and his two companions boarded the boat and the ensuing chug-chug of the motor echoed over the silent waters.

"If anybody comes snoopin' 'round the shack to-night," chuckled Gore, "all they'll find will be a 'For Rent' sign; eh, Baldy?"

"You said it, Sim," agreed Scott.

"We'll lay in at the cave overnight," continued Gore, "and maybe for a day or two. The Runt will tip us off when it's safe to go back. He'll know where we've gone."

Thus it was that only silence greeted the shout of Officer Healy to "surrender" when he and the other members of the rifle squad surrounded the little cabin that had harbored the outlaws. Healy was the first to enter the shack. The fumes of tobacco smoke and a few embers in the stove showed that their quarry had fled.

"Somebody tipped 'em off," was Healy's

announcement to his companions, "and it wasn't so long ago, either. Smell the tobacco? See, the fire's still smolderin' in the stove."

Phil and Jason had concluded breakfast but were still sitting at the dining room table continuing the discussion of the previous night's events when Officer Healy returned to his home. Mrs. Healey was in the kitchen and Tim had left for work. Mr. Healy first went to the kitchen to greet his wife and tell her he was ready for a "thumping good breakfast," then beckoning to Phil and the chubby cook, he led them into the parlor, where he told them of the failure of his expedition and of the disappointment of the police.

"Only the divil knows where the rascals have gone," said Healy ruefully, "but I've told the Inspector the whole story, even about Skinner bein' in cahoots with 'em. I'd give me left arm if we had proof of that!"

"Well, we have," said Phil earnestly.

"Didn't I hear the Runt tell them at Skeleton Bay that Skinner was one of them, and could be counted on?"

"Aye, that you did, lad," countered the policeman, "but it ain't evidence."

"But it's the truth!" declared Phil vigorously.

"Of course it is, lad," replied Healy soothingly, "but it's only your own statement. I know you wouldn't tell a lie, but before a jury you've got to have more than jist one witness. For the present, you keep quiet down at the docks about the whole affair. My plan right now is to call on this bird Skinner and see what I can learn."

Phil and Jason went off to work, both hopeful that Pat Healy would be able to evolve a plan that would put Desmond Skinner and his fellow conspirators behind the bars together. Officer Healy, forgetting sleep, and after a hastily eaten breakfast, proceeded to the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. As he waited in the anteroom outside of the private office of Desmond

Skinner, that worthy, at the moment, was engrossed in a telephone conversation.

"Hello, Desmond," came a voice familiarly from the other end of the line, "this is the Runt talkin'. The boys had to leave the Bay in a hurry. Naw, they didn't find any of the stuff. It's hidden in the swamp."

"How were the police able to track you?" asked Skinner, nervously drumming the fingers of one hand on the top of his desk. The Runt, by way of reply, gave a long, rambling account of how he had taken Phil to the Bay, and how the boy disappeared. At this information, Skinner ground his teeth in rage.

"Why in the dickens did you do that?" he asked.

"Aw, what are you kickin' about?" inquired the Runt. "Supposin' I made a mistake in takin' him out there. You're safe. He don't know nothin' about you. And the stuff's safe. What's eatin' you?"

There was no use arguing with the Runt. Cocksure and conceited, he was attempting

to show Skinner that no personal harm would come to him. The Runt continued:

"Listen, Desmond! If the kid tipped off the police, and maybe he got suspicious and did, it's up to you to get rid of the brat, get me? Oh, all right; I'll call you later."

The reason for the abrupt termination of the call was Skinner's dismay when his secretary, the pompous Perry, entered and advised him that a police officer was in the outer office. Skinner banged the receiver, turned to Perry with a snarl, then with a manifest effort to regain control of himself, said:

"All right, send him in."

As Officer Healy entered the magnificent office, Skinner arose from his chair, and with a suave, disarming smile, walked around his desk and put out his hand to greet the policeman.

"I came up, Mr. Skinner," announced Healy without further ado and ignoring the outstretched hand, "to ask you a few questions."

"Is that so, Officer?" countered the other. "Now, what might they be about?"

Skinner, by now, was apparently perfectly at ease. He directed Healy to take a chair, offered him a cigar, which the honest man declined, smiled pleasantly and directed him to proceed. Without mentioning Phil Hardy's name, Healy for ten minutes shrewdly questioned the smiling man before him about the Skeleton Bay country, prefacing his remarks with the explanation that the police had heard the bay country secreted "Four Egg" Gore, "Ghost" Hansen, and "Baldy" Scott.

"Of course," said Skinner, "those names are familiar to me from reading about them in the paper, and let me see, Gore once worked for our company, I believe. Yes, that's right, he did. But the whole thing, Officer, really sounds like a Wild West story, doesn't it? Naturally, I believe everything you tell me, but I know nothing whatever about it. Just why did you come to see me?"

It was now Pat Healy's turn to be cautious. Thus far he had not given Skinner reason to believe that he suspected him, nor did he intend to, at this stage of the game anyway. It would have been a bad move on his part if he had allowed Skinner to think for a minute that the police were after him too.

"Well," said the policeman slowly, "you remimber that same gang was stealin' things before from the company, and I thought perhaps they was up to their old tricks."

"Not so far as I know," said Skinner smoothly, "but I'll do a little investigating on my own account and if they have I'll surely get in touch with you. Lovely day, isn't it, Officer? Come in and see me any time."

With a nod and a smile, Skinner signified the end of the interview, arose and bowed Pat Healy out of his office.

"I tell you," said Healy that evening to Phil and Jason when they were all gathered together again in the parlor after supper,

"Skinner's a smart one—and dangerous, too. I'd like nothing better than to slip the bracelets on that buzzard. He thought he was smooth, noddin' and bowin' me out of his office, smirkin' all the time, but, knowin' what you'd told me, lad, I saw through him."

"Golly!" exclaimed Phil regretfully, "isn't there any way we can prove he's the ringleader? Can't we show that he's robbing the company of everything while Mr. Dennison's away?"

"Yes, one way," began Healy slowly. "If we could lay our hands on the gang, that would do the trick. They'd all squeal if we could corner 'em—crooks always do!"

"But they've gone and we don't know where," said Phil sorrowfully.

"Well, they've gone, but they'll come back some day," declared the policeman, "and we'll never quit lookin' for 'em, mark my word on that!"

Phil returned as usual to his work the next day at the warehouse, but for the first

time since he came to the city his heart was not in the tasks before him. All through the day, in his mind's eye, was the picture of Desmond Skinner, suave, smooth and cruel, sitting in Mr. Dennison's private office and, under cover of the position he held, acting like some evil bird of prey—robbing, stealing and destroying! As the noonday whistle blew, Phil spied Tim Healy, out of breath and excited, bearing a letter in his hand. It was this letter that brought Phil Hardy face to face with the greatest crisis of his career!

CHAPTER VII

PHIL LOSES HIS JOB

"It's for you, Phil," said Tim, dashing up to the boy and handing him the letter. "It's got a special delivery stamp on it. I was home when it came and I thought it might be important, so I brought it down here for you. Well, so long, I got to beat it back to work."

Without waiting for Phil to open the letter, Tim darted away. A glance at the postmark showed "Pleasanton" and Phil feared for a moment that it was from his mother and bore bad news. The address was written, however, in a strong masculine hand. Hurriedly tearing open the envelope, Phil read:

"Dear Phil:

"Hate to bother you now, but the $1,500 you owe me on the house would certainly

come in handy if you could let me have it now. The place is all finished and I reckon your mother has told you how well she likes everything. Never saw anyone as happy as she is. Didn't want to write you this letter because I know the money isn't due yet, but I've had a terrible lot of sickness in my family and a heap of doctor bills coming in. So would sure appreciate anything you can do for me. Please let me know right away.

"Yours truly,

"BILL SMALL."

Bill Small's letter was a tremendous shock to Phil, for it brought into the foreground a situation that Phil had not yet anticipated. When Phil had borrowed $1,500 from Asa Crabtree, the tight-fisted banker in Pleasanton, the conditions had been as follows: The loan was for an extended period, to be sure, but three months after it was granted Phil was expected to pay back $500. Phil reckoned that he could pay the $500 out of the $1,500 on deposit in old Asa's bank. He had not anticipated any such hard luck as had awaited him upon his return to the city. Now, however, Bill

Small's acute needs changed everything. If Phil paid the village carpenter the entire $1,500 ahead of time, he would not have left the $500 necessary to pay Mr. Crabtree. Phil, recalling how difficult it had originally been to negotiate a loan from the miserly old banker, now felt a shiver of apprehension in realizing that Mr. Crabtree held the upper hand. There came to his mind a picture of the grasping old man in his untidy and cobwebby office. Phil saw his thin lips tighten in an unbending line and he knew at that moment that he might expect little if any sympathy from old Asa. Sympathy was absolutely foreign to Crabtree's flinty nature.

"Gee!" exclaimed the boy, looking up from the letter with a worried expression, "I'm up against it, sure enough!"

Phil realized that he faced a dark and uncertain future. All thoughts of Skeleton Bay and the rogues sheltered there were immediately banished from his mind by this new development. The boy ran his fingers

through his hair, and walked nervously to and fro.

"Mother wondered why I couldn't get down to Pleasanton," he said to himself, "when she moved into the new house. I couldn't tell her it was because I couldn't afford the trip. And now I haven't the money to pay back my first note to Asa Crabtree if I pay old Bill Small, and I've just got to pay him. He needs the money if he's had sickness and hard luck like that. I've tried to save every penny I could, but it's been hard to save anything on twelve dollars a week. I just can't let Mother know—it would be terrible if she did! But I've got to get the money some way. I wonder if Mr. Crabtree would give me a little more time in which to pay back that first $500."

Phil lost no time at home that night in writing Asa Crabtree. He advised the banker to pay Bill Small the $1,500 at once, and explained how sickness in Small's family made it necessary to pay him somewhat

ahead of time. He also pointed out how this act would deplete his bank balance and he asked for an extension of time on the $500 payment due the bank within a short time. Phil felt better after he had written this letter and dispatched it.

It was in his gloomy, cobwebby office the next morning that Asa received the letter. Upon reading it the old skinflint chuckled audibly.

"By hickory," he exclaimed, "this is good news! Looks like old Asa's got a chance to get that Hardy property after all! Now, lemme see, how'll I work this? 'Course I can turn a neat penny on the house but I reckon I'll teach that young whippersnapper a lesson to boot!"

The elderly man arose from his desk, rubbed his thin and bloodless hands vigorously, smacked his lips once or twice in satisfied fashion, and added:

"He's got it comin' to him! And old Asa's the boy who'll learn him and learn him good!"

Meantime, back in the city, Phil waited anxiously for some word from the banker. Phil had told no one of his new predicament and this made the suspense of waiting all the more unendurable. When a few days had passed and he had received no reply, he began to worry again.

"But maybe Mr. Crabtree's pretty busy," thought the boy one morning after the postman had passed and left nothing for him. "If he weren't going to give me some extra time on that payment, though, I believe he'd let me know straight off. Golly, won't it be great when he does and I can tell Mother that the house is all paid for! She'll be the happiest person in the world, and I'll work my head off to pay back Mr. Crabtree." When Fate was unkind, Phil's courage always made him look at things in the brightest light after the first natural moment of discouragement.

Little did Phil realize as he took this optimistic view of the future that a letter from the banker was already in the mail

and would reach him the next morning. On his way to work, the boy was met by the postman and handed the fateful envelope.

"It's from Mr. Crabtree," he said joyfully, as he noted the bank's address. "I just knew he'd write!"

Phil opened the envelope and read:

"DEAR SIR:

"Your instructions regarding payment to Bill Small have been obeyed. He has received payment in full. I don't see my way clear, however, to give you an extension of time on the first $500 loan. Things are very tight now. Anyway I thought you could get the money from your rich friend, Mr. Dennison, in the city.

"Very truly yours,

"ASA CRABTREE."

Phil crumpled the piece of paper in his hand. Dejected, he leaned for a moment against the wall of a building, for Asa Crabtree's letter had hit him with all the force of a physical blow.

"I guess this is the end of everything for me—and Mother," said Phil to himself.

Phil Hardy was a fighter, though, and one blow up to now had never meant his finish. Deep in thought, he pondered the situation. There was only one thing to do: go direct to Pleasanton and make a personal plea to the grasping old man. Perhaps he could persuade him to grant a little more time if he talked to him face to face. It was worth the trial, Phil thought, so with the little hope that this new idea gave him, the boy started to the warehouse and there asked Pat Cleary, his foreman, if he might absent himself from duty the next day.

"Sure, me lad," declared Pat. "No bad news, I hope," he added sympathetically.

"I can't tell," replied Phil, "but I've got to go to Pleasanton for a day at least."

"Thin you go right ahead," said Pat.

"Golly," said Phil later to himself as he worked like a Trojan in a corner of the warehouse, thinking in that way he might accomplish two days' work in one, so that his absence the next day would not mean a loss to the firm, "Mr. Crabtree's just got

to give me some more time on that payment. It would kill Mother if she lost her new home now!"

He planned to be in Pleasanton all of the next day, so after leaving the warehouse that night he hurried home and prepared for the journey.

That same afternoon, alone in his magnificent private office, Desmond Skinner, the acting head of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation, was also doing some thinking.

"Let me see," he said, "almost a week has passed since I told the Runt I'd get rid of the Hardy kid. I'd have acted before now only I don't want to do anything that might direct suspicion toward me. I think I fooled that fat-headed policeman who called on me, however. Wonder if—hold on! I have it! I'll do it at once!"

A press on the buzzer attached to his desk, and an instant later Perry, the secretary, appeared.

"Perry," began Skinner, "beginning at once I want you each day to communicate

with Cleary, the foreman at the warehouse. Get from him the names of any of the help who are either tardy or absent from work. Tell me who they are."

"Yes, sir," was Perry's response as he silently left the office, closing the door behind him.

Desmond Skinner swung around in his chair. There was a cruel light in his eyes and an ugly smirk of satisfaction rippled over his thin, tight lips.

"Well, that'll turn the trick," he said. "If that country bumpkin is late or absent, *just once,* he's out of a job and there's no comeback at me!"

Unaware that his absence from work would play into Desmond Skinner's hands, Phil Hardy left that night for Pleasanton. Phil would have given anything in the world to have seen his mother and the new house which he had just built for her, but he felt that he could not call on her until he was successful in his mission with Mr. Crabtree. When he alighted from the train at

the little station, he made his way to the rather ornate mansion that served as Crabtree's home. On the way, Phil said to himself:

"I'll give Mother the surprise of her life when I waken her and tell her the good news! I'll go straight to her from Mr. Crabtree's."

It was nearly ten o'clock when Phil rang the bell of the Crabtree home and, to his surprise, the door was opened by old Asa himself. He peered over his glasses at Phil, holding the door only partially open and without the semblance of a smile of welcome came right to business by saying:

"Well, what brings you here, young man?"

"I came down especially to see you, Mr. Crabtree," replied Phil. "It's awfully important."

" 'Spect I know what it is," snorted the banker, adding grudgingly: "Come in." Phil followed him through the hall.

In the library of the Crabtree home, with

only the old banker visible, Phil Hardy made his plea. He told Mr. Crabtree of the misfortunes that had dogged his steps since his return to the city, and earnestly he asked that a little time be granted him on the first payment.

"If you do this for me, Mr. Crabtree," said Phil manfully, "I know that I'll be able to pay you the rest of the money on time. If you could just give me a three months' extension on that first loan, it would be all I'd want."

"So that's it, is it?" asked the crotchety old man, while Phil hopefully awaited a favorable answer. "You've come down here to see if you could make me play the goat for you, eh? Well, I won't do it. You got my letter, didn't you?" Phil nodded assent at this last question and Crabtree continued shortly: "The situation's unchanged!"

Phil arose slowly from his chair and stood before the richest man of the village. Plainly there was little chance of changing the decision, but in desperation Phil again

put the question bluntly to him. He could not believe that all hope was gone, and he asked:

"You mean you won't extend the time?"

" 'Course I mean it," snapped Crabtree churlishly. He also arose from his chair and, leveling a withered forefinger at the boy, added: "Why should I give you any time? Y'ain't got as good a position now as you had before and you couldn't no more pay me five hundred dollars three months from now than you could two weeks from now. Your city trainin' don't seem to have given you much business sense."

The old banker walked to the door and flung it open, thus signifying that the interview was at an end. The boy, hat in hand, followed him. He was not conscious of passing through the hall and out onto the porch. As Crabtree was closing the door he grudgingly called after Phil:

"Well, good night. I reckon I'm sorry for you but business is business!" And he loudly slammed the door shut.

The clock on the mantelpiece in the banker's home chimed the hour of eleven as Phil departed. Out on the darkened and deserted street, the boy tried to collect his wild and scattered thoughts. It was too late to go to his mother's home. Indeed, even if the hour were earlier Phil would not have attempted a visit because he knew full well that he could not hide his feelings from his mother, and his appearance and bearing would be proof positive to Mrs. Hardy that some misfortune had befallen him. He felt that most of all it was his duty, so long as a spark of hope remained, to keep his mother unaware of what had happened. For the first time in his life, Phil Hardy believed that he was beaten, but this thought remained with him only for a moment. He shook it off with an iron determination, and with chin held high he marched off down the village street toward the railroad station. There, under cover of darkness, with his troubled thoughts as his only companions,

he waited for the early morning train that was to bear him back to the city.

At the same time that Phil was trying to snatch a few minutes' much needed rest aboard the early express, which was not due in the city until eleven o'clock—and Phil, be it remembered, was supposed to report for work at eight—Perry, the pompous secretary, had completed a telephone call to the warehouse and, with a smirking smile, was entering the private office of Desmond Skinner.

"Mr. Skinner," he announced in satisfied fashion, "the foreman at the warehouse reported all the help on time this morning except the Hardy boy and Jack Bryan."

"Let's see," countered Skinner, with only the vestige of a wink, "Bryan's been ill, hasn't he?"

"Yes, I believe he has," agreed Perry.

"So really," continued Skinner, "the Hardy boy is the only absentee. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Skinner," declared the secretary promptly.

"Very good, Perry, you may go now," concluded the other.

When Perry had left the room, Desmond Skinner, a light of ill-concealed triumph in his little slits of eyes, leaned back in his chair, and smiled broadly.

"Well, well, well," he began, "I hardly expected the little bumpkin to play into my hands so soon. He gets his walking papers at once!"

After a few moments in which, to judge from his expression, he played with some unusually pleasant thoughts, Skinner reached for the telephone and in a sharp, stern voice ordered the switchboard girl to connect him with Pat Cleary at the warehouse.

"Hello, Cleary," he said abruptly, when the call was completed, "this is Mr. Skinner talking. Been intending to phone you for some time. I understand some of the laborers are reporting late these mornings." He

paused momentarily as Cleary began an explanation, then interrupting the latter, continued: "Well, I won't tolerate it! Now the Hardy boy hasn't yet shown up this morning, has he? What? You gave him permission to be? I don't want you assuming such authority, Cleary. We've got to stop that kind of business. I've got to make an example somewhere! I want you to dismiss him as soon as he comes in! No! No! Don't argue with me, Cleary. That's final! Do it!"

Skinner banged the receiver viciously and once more the evil smile of triumph spread over his face.

"Rid of him at last!" he said thankfully, then tightening his thin lips he added: "and I'll see that it's for all time too!"

Phil went directly from the train to the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation, having checked his bag at the station. When Phil reached the warehouse, his first sight was of old Pat Cleary standing mournfully, it seemed, off by himself in a corner. This

was so unlike the jovial foreman that Phil went at once to his side. When Phil saw Pat the latter's face revealed to the boy that something terrible had happened.

"Why, Pat, what's the matter?" he asked, anxiously, fearing that Pat was in some trouble of his own.

"Ah, Phil, me lad," said Pat, "they've trapped ye, they have, and I'm responsible, Lord help me if I ain't!"

Real tears coursed down Pat Cleary's cheeks now as, in a broken voice, he told Phil of Desmond Skinner's use of his tardiness as a pretext for his instant dismissal. Phil was used to adversity by now, however, so after the first shock he took the blow stoically. His face paled but his second thought was to reassure Pat.

"Don't you worry, Pat," he said comfortingly. "It wasn't your fault. He's had it in for me from the first. He'd have gotten rid of me some other way if this one hadn't worked."

"But I'm to blame," moaned Pat, his honest eyes gazing at him sorrowfully.

"Why, Pat, you're not at all," declared Phil, affectionately placing his hand on the older man's shoulder, "but we both know who is and some day our turn will come!"

The waning sun brought to a close Phil Hardy's last day with the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. Here was an end to his one-time high hopes of riches and success. All day, however, the lad worked with his accustomed thoroughness and when the closing whistle blew and he had drawn what little money was due him and had bade the warm-hearted foreman good-by, he walked slowly away from the long gray warehouse but before he turned the corner that would put it out of sight, he stopped and looked back.

"That's where I started when I came to the city," he said. "Golly, but it's hard to leave the old place. I'm thrown out—not even given a chance to explain, and it will

be tough to get another place. Here I am, with the biggest job of my life to do, and I'm out of work."

He paused for a moment and involuntarily clenched his fists.

"But I'll get work," he continued. "I'll work at anything to win out on this!"

CHAPTER VIII

JASON PROVES HIS FRIENDSHIP

That night, in the little parlor of the Healy home, Phil told his friends about his discharge from the warehouse. He explained that his tardiness at work was the reason given for his dismissal but old Jason, as well as all the members of the Healy family, indignantly denounced the heartless action of Desmond Skinner. Each and every one offered heartfelt sympathy and then, sensing the youngster's exhaustion, for Phil had had little sleep on the ride from Pleasanton to the city, they agreed with Mrs. Healy that he should go at once to bed. Jason, one arm affectionately around Phil's shoulder, accompanied him to his room to satisfy himself that the boy would really go to bed and when his steady, regular breath-

ing assured Jason that Phil was sleeping the sleep of deep fatigue, the cook left. He sought out Officer Healy and silently beckoned the latter to follow him into the dining room. There Jason blazed forth in righteous anger.

"The lad got the rawest deal I ever heard of," declared Jason. "Think of it! Turned out into the streets! Fired without cause!"

"Skinner's work, of course," muttered Healy.

"You're right," snapped Jason. "Crook that he is, I never thought he'd stoop that low! What wouldn't I give to get hold of Mr. Dennison but he's where nobody can reach him!"

"What will the boy do?" asked the policeman.

"He'll come out on top," said Jason stanchly, "that's what he'll do! But I happen to know that the lad's carryin' a heavy load o' debt on his mother's house."

"That's too bad," said Healy, "but"—and the policeman pounded so heartily on

the table to give emphasis to the words that followed that the dishes rattled—"here's a home where he can stay as long as he wants to, money or no money, and if needs be he can bring his mother, too."

"And here's one old salt," began Jason just as heartily, "who'll stand by him while the water's rough!"

Phil would have been touched by the loyalty of his two friends had he overheard this conversation, but he was in a dreamless sleep then, and next morning, in the hurry and bustle of breakfast, there was scant time for either Jason or Healy to talk to Phil confidentially.

Work! That was the magic word for Phil from then on. Morning after morning he left the Healy home, hopeful of finding something to do, but each evening saw him return disappointed but not dejected. The Healy family as well as Jason gave him moral support with their cheerful words and Phil was much touched when the kind policeman told him to stay in the house as their

friend and not as a boarder. It comforted the boy but each new dawn brought him one day nearer the day on which the first payment on his mother's house was due. It took a fine courage on Phil's part to grit his teeth, clench his fists and look all the harder in the face of his fruitless search. He answered advertisement after advertisement and even tried his sandwich board sign, but all to no avail. One morning, after two hours of plodding the pavements, Phil saw a sign outside an express company's yard. It contained only two words: "Boy Wanted." Phil stopped short in amazement before it. He could hardly believe his eyes. Could it be possible, he thought, that no one as yet had applied for the job? Without waiting for an answer he dashed into the yard and made at once for a tiny box-like cabin that served as a general office. On the door of this were the words: "Lightning Express Company, John L. Lovett, Proprietor."

"Is Mr. Lovett in?" asked Phil of a tall,

good-natured man, behind a counter. The latter puffed away at a stubby pipe.

"So you've come for the job, eh?" asked the other.

"Yes, sir, I have," said Phil somewhat breathlessly.

"Well," was the reply, "I'm Mr. Lovett. All right, Bud, the job's yours. It's hard work, though. You gotta be on hand at five A.M. I'll start you to-morrow morning. The pay is eight dollars a week. I never thought I'd hire the first kid who showed up but I have had that dog-gone sign out there for three days and I was just on the point of takin' it down and puttin' an ad in the papers when you popped in."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Lovett," said Phil joyfully.

"Well, Bud," broke in Mr. Lovett, with a slight twinkle in his eyes, "you seem grateful. Perhaps I'm overpayin' you, eh?"

"I hope I can prove to you that you're not," said Phil smiling, "I'll be here to-morrow morning."

Mr. Lovett watched Phil as he walked out of the yard. The older man, a look of amazement on his face, slowly scratched his head as he regarded the boy. Finally, he ejaculated:

"I declare! That boy's almost too good to be true—thankin' me for an eight-dollar-a-week job!"

There was no doubt, however, about the sincerity of Phil's gratitude. He felt as though he were walking on air as he reached the street and started on the long hike that would take him to Jason's restaurant, for he wanted the old cook to be the first to know the good news, and Jason's place was a good seven miles from the Lightning Express Company. Phil was so elated over having found a job that for the moment he forgot his other troubles. In the daily struggle and search for work, he had forgotten dates and one day had seemed pretty much like another but back in Pleasanton there was a person who did not forget, and took precautions so that he wouldn't. In the gloomy,

musty little office of his bank that was his private sanctum (over the door of which should have been inscribed the words, "All Ye Who Enter Here Leave Hope Behind"), Asa Crabtree sat looking at a calendar.

"Gettin' closer to the time when I reckon old Asa's goin' to make that Hardy boy jump a bit, and turn a neat profit in the doin' of it," was what he said to himself as he counted the weeks on his fingers.

"Lemme see now," he continued, "he's got less'n two weeks and I ain't heard from him—not a word. Mebbe I'd better jack him up with a letter. Yep, that's what I'll do! Jest call his attention to the fact that unless the money's forthcomin' on time I'll have to take over the house. 'Course that means that old lady Hardy will have to git out."

The old banker paused, and permitted a look of sorrow to grace his hypocritical face. It passed quickly, however, as though startled to find itself there and an expression of smug satisfaction took its place.

"Well, it ain't my fault," was what he said, smiling grimly.

When Phil burst in through the doorway of the "Deep Water Tavern," it was not necessary for Jason to be a mind reader to know that the boy bore good news. Phil's joyful countenance was all revealing.

"Jason," he exclaimed, "I've got a job!"

"Hooray!" bellowed Jason with such vim and vigor that the Chinese cook dropped a dish pan in amazement.

Jason came out from behind his counter and shook Phil's hand vigorously up and down in his excitement.

"It pays eight dollars a week," continued the boy rapidly, "and even though that's much less than I got at the old place, it's a lot better than no job."

"You're right," agreed Jason sagely.

"But I have to report at five o'clock in the morning, Jason," went on Phil, "and that means I'll have to move away from the Healys', because my new job's miles away on the north side of town."

"Oh, Phil!" exclaimed Jason, sorrow and regret written on every line of his honest face.

"I know it, Jason," said Phil, "but there's no other way."

Jason's sorrow was more than shared by the other members of the Healy family when Phil told them that night. Everyone in the household had grown to admire Phil because of his manly qualities. He was a prime favorite with all, and for the next few days Mary Healy made no effort to restrain the vagrant tears that rolled down her cheeks whenever her eyes lighted on Phil. Tim, too, was grieved over the news and he made Phil promise, over and over again, that he would spend his day off at the Healy home. Phil felt very badly about leaving all of his friends but his elation over having found work somewhat eased the pain of separation. He found a small, cheap room near his new place of work at the Lightning Express Company and prepared to move in on Sunday. On Monday morn-

ing, the day after his departure from the Healy house, the postman brought a letter addressed to him, and it so happened it was Jason who opened the door and received it. Jason saw at a glance that the communication was from the village banker.

"It's from that old skinflint, Asa Crabtree," said Jason, scowling at the envelope. "Bad news, no doubt! I'll just take it out to Phil myself."

Phil's work at the express company was arduous toil. Fortunately he had experienced hard work at the warehouse or he never could have stood this first day. Mr. Lovett told him that his chief job was "nurse to a ten-ton truck," and Phil soon learned that he was to assist the drivers in loading and unloading their vehicles, and occasionally accompany them on delivery trips. Phil was helping Charlie Ammon, one of the older men, unload a heavily laden truck, lugging weighty crates and perspiring freely, when Jason, garbed in what he called his "goin' to meetin' " clothes, and

jauntily swinging a cane, strolled into the yard.

"Why, Jason," exclaimed Phil, looking at him in astonishment, "what are you doing over here?"

By way of reply, Jason reached in his inside coat pocket and produced the letter from Asa Crabtree, adding:

"I brought you a letter, Sonny. It's bad news and I wanted to share it with you."

"Why, how do you—" began Phil.

"I know," interrupted Jason, "it's bad news 'cause it's from one Asa Crabtree!"

The boy, with the old cook looking over his shoulder, read the letter. There was no mistaking its purpose. It said:

"DEAR SIR:

"This is formal notice that unless the $500 you owe the bank is paid when due, I will be forced to take over your mother's house and it will be necessary for her to live elsewhere.

"Yours truly,

"ASA CRABTREE.

"P.S.—You know the date."

"Yes, I know the date all right!" said Phil, turning to his best friend with a troubled look, "and if I don't get that money in a week, he's got me!"

"But we've a week, Sonny," declared Jason, encouragingly, "and we can do a lot in that time!"

There was a ring of hope in Jason's voice but it found no echo in Phil Hardy's heart. After the old cook left, the boy turned back to his work with a helpless feeling. He had no money with which to meet the payment, and no chance of getting any. He hadn't worked long enough in his new position to even warrant Mr. Lovett loaning him the money, should he have dared to ask him. Hot, bitter tears came into his eyes and he turned his back upon the men in the yard for a few minutes, for even his dauntless courage had gone down before this new blow. It seemed as though the bitterest things of life had come to him since Mr. Dennison had left. The kindly president of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation had started him

slowly climbing the first few rungs of the ladder of success. Then came the first rebuff when his mother's home had been destroyed in Pleasanton, but how proud and happy he had been to be able to give her a new one and how proud and happy she was to think it was her boy who had done it. And now came this last and hardest blow! In a few days she would be driven out into the street, without a roof to shelter her. It seemed more than he could bear.

"Help me with these boxes," called out Charlie Ammon.

The call jolted Phil back into the world of realities and he turned to his work with feverish speed.

That night Phil slept but little, but there was no let down in his toil the next day. Another sleepless night, and another arduous day went by and still he had found no solution to his problem. Meantime, down on the water front, was another person whose worry and anxiety were as great as Phil's.

Good old Jason was the one. Deep in

thought, for hour after hour, he sat behind the polished counter of his restaurant.

"Another day gone by and that poor boy worryin' himself to death, I know!" he would repeat to himself time and again.

"Yes," he continued, "I've racked what little brains I've left after thirty year o' seafarin', and bless my buttons, I'm stumped!"

It was during one of these prolonged meditations that an idea came to Jason—an idea that made him emit a war whoop that almost rattled the pots and pans off the shelves of the little room. Fortunately there were no customers there at the time or they would have dashed from the place in terror.

"Yes, sir, that's the one thing I can do," he exclaimed. "I won't tell Sonny, though, till it's done. He'd never stand for it. Lemme see, now. Yes, I've paint right here and I can do the sign this minute."

Jason made his way, with all haste, to the little room back of the restaurant. Ten

minutes later, the window of the "Deep Water Tavern" displayed a large sign. It read as follows:

THIS FIRST-CLASS EATING HOUSE
FOR SALE CHEAP
Cash Only!
Jason Royle, Prop.

"There," said Jason, proudly surveying his handiwork, "that ought to turn the trick!" And that night he slept soundly, for Jason had found the solution to *his* problem at least!

It was not until the next morning that the first prospective purchaser appeared. He was a short, stubby man, with a thin fringe of whiskers and a wary eye. He announced himself as "Phil Patchin." Jason knew in a moment that he was an old salt.

"So you think you'd like to buy this place, eh?" asked Jason agreeably, after he had mentioned his price.

"Yep, but five hundred cash is more'n

old Phil Patchin's apt to pay," was the cautious reply.

"I'm ashamed o' myself for sellin' it that cheap," declared Jason. "Wouldn't do it if I hadn't a special reason."

"Heh, heh, heh!" laughed the other, "and I got a special reason for hangin' on to my five hundred!"

"All right, Matey," concluded Jason, successfully hiding his keen disappointment, "but you're passin' up a golden opportunity!"

"Reckon that's my funeral," was Patchin's rather surprising reply, then with a sly wink at Jason he added: "But don't you go sendin' flowers!"

"Bless me now," said Jason in astonishment when the stranger had left, "did I muff a sale? But Phil's got to have five hundred and have it quick. I'll bet my buttons that old codger'll be back here. He liked this place!"

Knowing that he had only forty-eight hours in which to act, because Phil's note

would then be due, old Jason decided on a master stroke to effect a sale. After the inquiring Patchin had left the restaurant, Jason snatched the old sign out of the window and when he did he noticed that Patchin from a vantage point across the street, was watching him. Once more the chubby cook fled to the kitchen. He returned in a few moments, in which he labored earnestly, bearing a new sign, and this immediately flaunted its message to the world. It read:

THIS FIRST-CLASS EATING HOUSE FOR SALE
FOR $500 CASH UP TO 1 P.M.
$600 CASH UP TO 2 P.M.
$700 CASH UP TO 3 P.M.
AFTER 3 P.M. *Positively Not for Sale*

Jason then retired to his accustomed place behind the counter from which he could see the street without being seen by anyone there.

Sure enough, Patchin's curiosity got the better of him, and he sauntered over to read the new sign. He again entered the restau-

rant, and started to speak, but Jason busied himself behind the counter with assumed indifference and cut him off tartly.

"No more argufyin'," was Jason's order. "Read the sign!"

"I have read it," said Patchin, "but y'ain't serious, be you?"

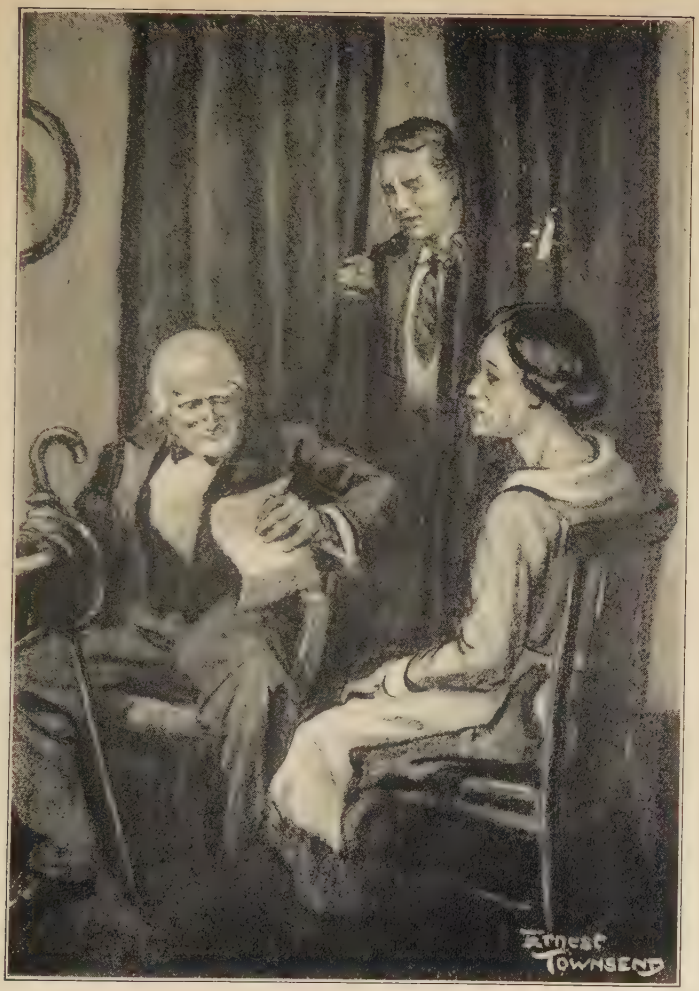
"Never was more serious in my life," declared Jason earnestly.

"Well, that bein' the case," was the startling announcement from Patchin as he produced a large roll of bills, "I'll buy. It's one minute afore one so I get it for five hundred, don't I?"

"Right you are," declared Jason with the same pretension of indifference, yet removing his apron, "and you can move in at once!"

Phil Hardy was seated at his bedroom window, staring out into the darkness. To-morrow was his day off and to-morrow was also the day on which his payment was due. He planned to go to Pleasanton.

"Maybe I can help Mother some by being



PHIL, HIS BLOOD BOILING WITH ANGER STEPPED FROM BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

Phil Hardy's Triumph. *Page* 164

with her," he thought. "I won't let her be alone when Mr. Crabtree comes."

A rustle of paper beneath his door attracted his attention. Phil arose, turned up the light, and saw a letter lying on the floor. He picked it up.

"Gee, it's a special delivery," he said. "The landlady must have put it under my door."

Phil opened the letter and read it, then buried his face in his hands and wept. This evidence of loyal friendship was too much for the boy, for here were the words he read:

"SONNY:

"We got them licked! Here's a money order for $500. That's what you need to save your mother's house. I've shipped tonight as cook on the *Lass of London* bound for Hongkong, China. God bless you, Sonny.

"Your old friend,

"JASON ROYLE."

CHAPTER IX

PHIL IS CAPTURED BY THE GANG

HAPPIER than ever before in his life and yet deeply mournful for the loss of Jason, Phil Hardy boarded the train for Pleasanton and, on arrival there, went direct to the home of his mother. She was overjoyed at seeing him and after they exchanged affectionate greetings, Phil told her everything that had happened. Mrs. Hardy was a picture of deep distress as Phil related his struggles and disappointments and finally how old Jason had come to the rescue at the last moment.

"Oh, Phil," she said, wiping tears from her eyes, "what you've gone through for me! And what a wonderful friend Mr. Royle has been!"

"Mother, he's the best man in the world

and I'll work my head off to get him back and repay him this loan," declared Phil earnestly.

"Now, Mother," the boy continued, "no one in town knows I'm here to-day. I didn't see a single person at the depot and I came all the way up here without meeting anyone I knew. As you know, my first note comes due to-day and Mr. Crabtree will be over here. He's coming to tell you that you'll have to leave. Well, I want to be behind that curtain when he talks to you, and when he's all through I'll do some talking!"

Phil indicated the heavy portières that separated the living room from the dining room, and hardly had he completed his sentence when both he and his mother heard a commanding knock on the front door. Phil stepped behind a curtain and arranged it so that he was completely hidden. Mrs. Hardy went to the front door and there, sure enough as expected, stood old Asa Crabtree, the village skinflint. Mrs. Hardy bade him enter and as he sat stiffly in a com-

fortable chair in the pretty little living room, he looked over the interior of the house with the air of a proprietor. Without introduction, he launched into a lengthy explanation of Phil's failure to meet his first payment. Phil, behind his curtain, overheard every word he said.

"And that's the story, Mrs. Hardy," he concluded. "I hate to tell it to you bein' as how you're his mother, but the boy jest ain't made good his note!"

"You want the house?" asked Mrs. Hardy.

"Well, I reckon that's it," said the banker and he tried to assume a sympathetic expression but with no success. " 'Course it's hard on me to tell you so, but business is business. You'll have to clear out. S'pose you could do it to-day?"

Before Mrs. Hardy could answer, Phil, his blood boiling with anger, stepped from behind the curtain, and gave Asa Crabtree the one great shock of his life. The old

miser dropped both his cane and hat in amazement.

"Never mind picking them up," commanded Phil, speaking crisply but admirably restraining his temper. "I'm afraid my mother can't oblige you by moving out to-day. Give me that note, and here's your money!"

With these words, Phil extended the new bank notes he had obtained when he cashed the money order Jason sent him. At the same time he took from old Asa the note that he had fumblingly produced.

"Now, Mr. Crabtree," the boy went on, "you clear out of here just as fast as you can, and if it isn't fast enough I may have to help you!"

Asa Crabtree's confusion and amazement were comical. He picked up his hat and cane, stuffed the money into his pocket, and started for the door. He was in such haste that he tripped over a chair and almost fell to the floor. Regaining his balance he prac-

tically ran the remainder of the distance, opened the door and hurried down the stairs to the street. Both Phil and his mother could not restrain smiling as they watched him, for Phil's appearance and the prompt payment of the money had so confounded the village banker that his haste in trying to get away was ludicrous.

After his departure it was some time before Phil and his mother could regain their composure. Both had been under such a severe strain that now, with the tension released, it was hard to be normal again. Phil seized his mother around the waist and danced her around the room. After Mrs. Hardy had succeeded in releasing herself from Phil's vigorous young embrace, her first thought was that Phil might remain a few days. She was much disappointed when he replied:

"I wish I could, Mother, but I've got to get back to my work in the city."

"Phil, dear," his mother said appealingly, "why don't you come back to Pleasan-

ton to work? You could make almost as much money here, couldn't you, and we would be so happy together."

"Mother," said Phil, arising and placing his arms affectionately about her, "you know there's nothing I'd rather do as much as that, but I can't and this is why: I want to make good in the city. I haven't yet and I just can't give up. I will make good, Mother!"

"Of course you will," declared Mrs. Hardy proudly. As she spoke, it was easy to see that the fine, fighting spirit that was so much a part of Phil Hardy was also deep in the spirit and consciousness of his mother; indeed was perhaps drawn from that very source. The remainder of the time, before Phil's departure for the city, was spent happily planning for the future.

Back on the job at the Lightning Express Company the next day, Phil made a rapid calculation of his finances. He had twenty dollars in cash, and with the second payment on his mother's house not due for a year, he

felt safe for the present. True enough, he owed old Jason $500, but this gave him no worry. For the first time in many months, Phil was completely happy and went about his work with whistle and song. Mr. Lovett noticed this as he watched him loading a truck. The older man approached him and said:

"By golly, Bud, your day off must have done you a heap o' good. You don't look like you were carrying all the world's misery to-day!"

"I'm not, Mr. Lovett," said Phil with a happy smile. "I feel fine."

"Well, that's good," said the other, "because there's plenty of work around here to-day. You and Charlie Ammon will have to take the long North Shore run."

"Isn't that the one we always take?" asked Phil. The North Shore run, as he knew it, took in a few little towns and villages on the coast, just to the north of the city.

"I should say not," declared Mr. Lovett.

"This one's an all-day and part-night job. We only have to make it once a month or so. It takes you up into the Skeleton Bay country."

The telephone rang peremptorily from the near-by office and Mr. Lovett turned quickly and went off to answer it. Because of this he failed to see the look of amazement on Phil's face, produced by his statement. Further thoughts on Phil's part, however, were ended by the appearance of Charlie Ammon. The latter, a genial Swiss, came up to Phil with the announcement that everything was ready, so together they boarded the heavy truck and started out on their long trip. They stopped at many places, delivering packages and parcels, with Phil acting as delivery boy except where their combined strength was needed to "tote" an extra heavy shipment from the truck to either a home or place of business. Mr. Lovett was eminently correct in his prediction that the job "was an all-day one, and a part-night one, too." It began to

look as though it would be late indeed before they turned back to the city again.

Gradually they reached a sparsely settled country with houses few and far between. In the distance were small patches of heavy woods, and to the right, from time to time, came the roar of the sea as huge waves broke against the rocky coast. Phil, by this time, was able to recognize many of the scenes that were familiar to him by reason of his ride with the Runt, but he said nothing to Charlie regarding his previous adventure, as he did not wish to disturb the driver. Indeed, the sinister and desolate character of the countryside had, of itself, made a vivid impression on his companion. They had not passed a house for a good many miles now and conversation had languished as each was busy with his own thoughts. Finally as the truck puffed its way up a rather steep grade, Charlie turned to Phil and said:

"By gee, I don't like this country!"

"Why not, Charlie?" asked Phil.

"None of the boys do," was the reply. "Too many chances for holdups. They ain't no houses out here except every coupl'a miles."

"It sure is lonesome," agreed Phil, looking around at the grim landscape.

"That ain't the half of it," declared Charlie with emphasis. "It's tough country, Phil! Believe me, boy, I'm glad we don't have to go through them woods."

The driver pointed, as he spoke, to a dark and forbidding stretch of forest that lay a mile or more ahead of them, and Phil figured from memory that the timber represented one boundary of the swamp.

"I am, too," he said earnestly.

"We only got one more call," the driver said consolingly. "Soon as we deliver a package to that house 'bout half a mile up the road we can turn round and start back."

The house to which Charlie referred was not yet in sight, but after a bend in the road it came into view. It was a little cottage, bare and unpainted, and in a frightful state

of disrepair. Two stories high, it stood back some fifty yards from the highway and the path leading to it was almost completely obscured by weeds that grew riotously. Though dusk was at hand, no light came from any of the downstairs windows and as the upstairs ones were closely covered with shutters, Phil doubted if the place were occupied. He said as much aloud.

"Yes, it is," declared Charlie. "I've brought things here before and it always looks like this."

Phil reached for the one package that remained in the truck. His shipping bill contained the name "Sam Scruff."

"Just knock on the door and ask for him," directed Charlie. "If no one answers, we won't leave it."

Phil swung off the truck and made his way carefully through the weeds of the pathway up to the door of the house. He knocked once, then twice, but getting no response, and fearing the rickety old door might collapse under his hand, he was about

to return to the truck, when the door swung open. Before Phil stood a short and powerfully built man, with cold gray eyes, and a lined and weather-beaten face. Straggly gray hair, long and unkempt, hung over his forehead, and gave him a wild and formidable appearance. His clothes were dirty and ragged, with most of the buttons gone, and he was propped up by a crutch held beneath his left armpit. Phil noticed that his left leg had been severed, from the thigh down.

"Express package for Mr. Sam Scruff," announced Phil.

"I'm him," was the response in a rasping, grating voice.

Without further ado, Phil handed over the package and started to rejoin Charlie. He had caught just a glimpse of the interior of the cottage and what he saw there was in keeping with the appearance of the man who had opened the door. Phil carried in his mind a picture of a dusty, litter-laden floor, one or two broken-down chairs and a

general air of discomfort and filth. But what Phil did not see was a figure in one of the upper rooms who, peering out from behind a window shutter, had a moment before jumped from his chair in alarm on hearing the loud knocks on the door and Phil's voice.

"Strike me dead if it ain't the kid!" was the unseen onlooker's exclamation as he got a good view of the boy below. He waited tensely until Phil boarded the truck and it had turned and started back on its long journey to the city. Then he rushed clatteringly downstairs.

"Hey, 'Ghost,' what's the matter?" was Sam Scruff's startled exclamation as the man burst into the room. "You look as white as a sheet."

"Ghost" Hansen, for it was he, rubbed his good hand over his forehead and snapped from his finger tips the drops of perspiration he collected, while his eyes were wide with apprehension.

"Sam," he began in a hoarse whisper as

though he feared the occupants of the truck might be still at hand, "did you know who just gave you that package?"

"No, who?"

"The little rat of a kid who peached on us all!"

"What!" exploded the cripple, holding on to a chair for support, and swinging his crutch wildly through the air. "Was that him? Why didn't you tell me? I'd a' knocked him cold with this!"

"Hold on, Sam," was Hansen's reply. "I'd like to seen you done it, but maybe there's a better way. He don't know you. Why can't we get him back out here? Wait'll I tell Gore and 'Baldy'!"

Sam Scruff was well aware of Phil Hardy. The desperate old renegade had taken the cottage adjoining the woods to serve as a lookout for "Four Egg" Gore and his gang of ruffians, for when Gore discovered that Phil had been near the Skeleton Bay country, he felt unsafe without a constant watch being kept. Scruff, long a

crony of Gore's, was sent for from the haunts which he frequented in the city and he at once rented the little cottage. It was an excellent vantage point, for anything or anyone on the way to the forest and swamp that encircled Skeleton Bay would have to pass his door. But the old rascal had never before seen Phil and that one thing was perhaps all that saved the boy from physical violence when he delivered the express package. That night Scruff held "open house" for the other members of the gang, hastily summoned by "Ghost" Hansen for a meeting.

"It was the kid hisself," declared the "Ghost" solemnly. "I seen him with my own eyes!"

"Blast him!" cried Gore, "I'd like to seen him!"

"Listen, Sim," said Hansen excitedly, "we can get him. We'll have Scruff buy somethin' the express company'll have to deliver, eh?"

"That's it!" replied Gore admiringly.

"The Squirt don't know Sam. Never laid eyes on him!"

"So we can take our time makin' our plans," counseled Hansen. "This time we'll get him——"

"And get him right," said Gore completing the sentence with a wicked scowl.

"That's talkin', Sim," Scruff interrupted.

One reason, however, why both Gore and Hansen were willing to move slowly in their plans for revenge on Phil was apparent the next day when they, as well as "Baldy" Scott, were back in the ramshackle hut that lay hidden in the depths of the swamp.

"Skinner says to lay low for just a little while and we can pull the biggest job of all. Then we'll be on Easy Street."

It was Gore talking and he clapped his great, hairy hands together in glee as he spoke.

"Maybe," was the doubtful assertion of "Baldy."

"Maybe nothin'," snarled Gore, facing

him. "I know what's what, 'Baldy.' You think the Squirt will spoil it, eh?"

"Ain't he spoiled everything else?" countered Baldy dolefully.

"Well, he ain't spoilin' this," said Gore slowly with deadly emphasis, "and he won't! We'll do this job and then we'll tend to the dirty little sneak! He's got it comin' to him, all right!"

"And when we're through with him, we'll have two jobs done, eh?" broke in "Ghost" Hansen, significantly.

Meantime, back in the city, Phil was hard at work. The weeks sped into months as Phil toiled away at the Lightning Express Company. Mr. Lovett, the proprietor, was so well pleased with the boy's efforts and his cheerful willingness to do anything without grumbling, that he had already given him two advances in salary, and Phil was now once more making twelve dollars a week.

"And deserving more," was Mr. Lovett's comment one morning as he recalled Phil's raises and watched the boy at the far end of

the company's yard. His reverie was disturbed by the jangle of the telephone bell.

"Yes," he said, adjusting the receiver to his ear. "Yes, Phil Hardy's here. You say this is Officer Healy and that the message is important? All right, I'll call him right away."

Phil was delighted to hear the pleasant voice of Pat Healy at the other end of the wire. He had not seen anything of his old friends, the Healys, since Jason had left, partly because he was always too tired at the end of each day to do any visiting and partly because the Healy home without Jason's presence would have been a sad place to him. Pat, speaking in unconcerned fashion, asked Phil if he would come to supper the next night.

"You bet I will," said Phil heartily, not to hurt the other's feelings.

Officer Healy's voice suddenly dropped to low and muffled tones.

"Can anyone overhear you talkin'?" he asked.

Phil looked about. He had the little office to himself.

"No," he replied wonderingly. "I'm all alone in Mr. Lovett's office. No, there's no one else even near me. Yes, this is a private telephone."

"All right, lad," was Mr. Healy's response, "I'm at headquarters. We just got a tip that somethin's doin' up at Skeleton Bay, and I thought you'd better be after seein' me as soon as possible. Now don't breathe a word to a livin' soul! Come to the house to-morrow night!"

Phil was excited over the policeman's message and thought of it continuously the rest of the day, but he of course said nothing to anyone about it. The next night saw him at the Healy home where Mrs. Healy, happy and proud to have him at her table once more, insisted again and again that he "make out his meal." Tim, who had long admired even the very ground that Phil walked on and cherished him as the noble example he would like to follow, aided his

mother in her task of seeing to it that Phil had plenty to eat. Officer Healy ate his meal silently, his thoughts seemingly far away, and as soon as the table was cleared he asked Phil to step into the parlor with him.

"I'm sindin' Tim and Mary to the movies," he explained, "because I wanted to be alone with ye. Now lad, here's the situation. Gore and his gang have been seen around the Bay country agin and we've been tipped off to it. But that ain't all. Skinner has been routin' his home-comin' ships off the head waters of the bay. That's niver been done before. Now, why is he doin' it?"

"All right," continued Healy without waiting for a reply and talking in low and confidential tones, "I'll tell ye! He's sindin' 'em through the inner channel for only one reason—so they can drop booze. That's why! They're carryin' that along with their regular cargo. The *China Queen* comes home next week. I don't have to tell

ye she's the biggest ship the company's got. Well, lad, when she hits the bay the police'll be there, too!"

Officer Healy and Phil talked far into the night—long after Tim and his mother had returned from the theater and gone to bed. The old policeman told the boy that he gave him the advance information because he knew full well that Phil would keep it secret and also because the police might need him in the course of the next few days. When Phil finally left, Healy escorted him to the street car.

"It's so late," he explained as they walked along the deserted street, "that ye may have to wait some time for a car, and if you do I'll be gettin' a few words in edgewise."

"Now, lad," continued the policeman, "I feel it in me bones we'll land that crew this time!"

"I sure hope so," declared Phil fervently.

"And it'll be a happy day for you, me

boy, when we've got that flock o' buzzards behind the bars!"

"Golly, Mr. Healy, if you get them this time I'll feel that most of my troubles will be over."

"Don't you worry, lad," were Healy's parting words just before Phil boarded the street car, "we'll get 'em. Crooks always get caught!"

Four days passed and Phil heard nothing further from Officer Healy, but he waited contentedly because of the faith he had in that worthy policeman. On the fifth day Mr. Lovett summoned him and Charlie Ammon and announced that they would again have to take the long North Shore run.

"Hate to give it to you," he apologized, "but you both know the way, and we got some things to deliver out there. Get started as soon as you can. You won't be able to get back before night, but I don't want you out too late."

Phil said nothing but as he and Charlie

started out on the long trip, the boy felt a curious sensation of impending danger. It was an indefinable feeling but it passed away when Charlie, after a check up of the packages in the truck, said joyfully:

"Hooray, Phil, we don't have to go so far this time. 'Member last time—that old one-legged duck you delivered something to?"

"Yes," said Phil.

"Well," continued Charlie, "our last package is for a place two miles this side of his house."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Phil truthfully.

Their trip out to the North Shore was uneventful but even so Phil was happy when, the last package having been delivered, Charlie swung the truck around and started back toward town. It was night now, but a glorious full moon shone in the heavens and lighted the broad concrete highway for blocks ahead of them. Charlie was humming some old country air to himself as they

sped along when suddenly the gas pedal refused to respond and they coasted to a stop. As Charlie pushed on the accelerator several times, the motor gave a few coughs and wheezes, but finally died away altogether.

"Dog-gone, a fine lunkhead I am," said Charlie disconsolately. "You know what's happened?"

Charlie had made an inspection of the car and coming back to the driver's seat looked up at Phil, as he spoke, with an air of foolish despair.

"No," said Phil, who had remained on the front seat.

"We're out of juice," admitted Charlie. "Can you beat that?"

"Well," he continued in resigned fashion, "nothin' else to do but hoof it a coupl'a miles to that garage we passed down the road."

"I'll go with you, Charlie," suggested Phil, for the idea of remaining alone in that desolate spot brought up the thoughts of the gang at Skeleton Bay and for the

moment his earlier vague feeling of danger returned.

"No," was Charlie's reply, "somebody'll have to stay here and watch the truck. You been deliverin' stuff all day and you're tired. I'll go. You wait here and rest. I won't be long."

The driver started off down the highway and Phil, by the aid of the brilliant moonlight, was able for a long time to keep him in sight. Phil curled up on the big seat of the truck and gave voice to his apprehension.

"Gee," he said finally, "I feel creepy tonight! Reckon the only thing to do, though, is to just sit tight here and wait for Charlie to come back."

Perhaps twenty minutes or more had elapsed since Charlie's departure when Phil noticed the headlights of an approaching automobile. Believing it to be Charlie and a garage truck returning with gasoline, Phil clamored down to the roadside.

"Golly, the fellow Charlie's with is sure

traveling some," thought Phil as the car bore down on him. It was truly going at a terrific rate of speed, its motor roaring like a rapid-fire gun. Phil's first thought was that Charlie had perhaps forgotten just where the truck stood and had not told the driver to slow down so he decided to wave his hands and signal the driver to stop. He raised his right arm in signaling fashion and the next instant he leaped to one side of the highway just as the car sped by.

"Holy smokes!" exclaimed Phil as he watched the retreating red lamp at the rear of the car that fast became a speck in the distance, "that fellow must have thought I was a holdup. If I hadn't jumped he would have bumped me. I never saw a car go that fast before in my life. Wonder what's holding up Charlie?"

Meantime, with screeching brakes, the car that had sped past Phil came to an abrupt stop two miles farther down the road and three men left it to enter a tumble-down shack. They were arguing in loud and

harsh tones. The three were "Ghost" Hansen, "Baldy" Scott and Sam Scruff.

"Here's Gore now," announced Hansen, pushing open the door and revealing the leader. Gore was sitting at a dirty, littered table playing solitaire with a pack of greasy cards. "We'll put it up to him. I was drivin' and I didn't think so," continued the "Ghost."

"Think what?" asked Gore, not taking his eyes from the cards.

The "Ghost" jerked his hook in the direction of the other two.

"Sam Scruff here," he explained, "thought he seen the Hardy kid on the road back a way. 'Baldy' and me both seen a kid but we don't think it was him."

"Sim," shouted Scruff, waving his crutch, "I've got only one leg but I've got two sharp eyes, and it was that kid! I seen him! I'll swear to it! Why, bless me, Sim, you know I never forget a face!"

"I'll bet Sam's right," said Gore with a frown. "This means trouble!"

By this time Gore had placed his cards on the table and was giving the others his undivided attention.

"What'll we do?" asked "Baldy."

"Get the Runt over here as soon as you can," snapped Gore, shoving himself into his coat and grabbing for his hat. With that all four men issued forth into the night.

Little did poor Phil Hardy realize as he stood alone by the truck, waiting for Charlie to reappear, that five desperate men were slowly encircling him under cover of darkness. "Ghost" Hansen and "Baldy" Scott crept along behind bushes until they placed themselves where they knew they could cut off Phil's escape if he started running down the road toward the nearest habitation, which was citywards. The Runt was to Phil's right, and Gore and Sam Scruff came up behind the truck. Gore cautioned Scruff to remain behind, but the cripple insisted on swinging along to a point not more than one hundred yards from the truck.

"He might have help. We don't know

who else's with him," Scruff said, in a whisper, "and everyone of us'd come in handy then. You know me, Sim. I can swing this crutch like a sword!"

It was Gore, his huge gorilla-like hulk tiptoeing alongside the truck, who jumped out and seized Phil. He swung his huge and powerful arms around the boy's body and clapped one hand over Phil's mouth. Then he whistled, and was joined in a few moments by his companions.

"Well, boys," announced Gore triumphantly, "I got him at last! And he won't get away this time!"

"Are we takin' him to Sam's place?" asked Hansen.

"No, you fool," snapped back Gore. "We're takin' him to the shack in the swamp. He can't get away from there!"

Phil was led, perhaps dragged would better describe it, back to where the outlaws had sequestered their car. Gore flung him into it, and, after a few minutes' drive, he was once more pulled forth and taken on

foot through the swampy woods. Presently before him, in the moonlight, stood the cabin looking as disreputable and ramshackle as ever.

He was pushed through the door and ordered up a rickety stairway. Gore paused for a moment while Hansen and Scott roped Phil's wrists and ankles, then the leader of the gang, with a vindictive look, pushed the boy in the face. Phil fell through another door into a vacant little room and hit the floor. Stars jumped before his eyes and a sudden pain flared through his head as he fell heavily to the floor.

"You coward!" he cried.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Gore, grinning down at him. "Well, Squirt, we gotcha at last, we gotcha for good! You came sneakin' 'round once too often, didn't you? Well, you won't go sneakin' no more, do you see?"

"I wasn't sneaking," retorted Phil.

"Don't gimme none of your lip," said Gore violently, picking up a huge stick

from the floor. "I'll bash you with this if you do, for I'm here to tell you that you've run afoul 'Four Egg' Gore for the last time!"

The bully towered above him and Phil realized the man's rage was insane enough so that on the slightest provocation he would carry out his threat. Utterly helpless, bound hand and foot, there was nothing the boy could do but keep silent. Gore, with a chuckle, watched him closely, then suddenly turned, closed the door, and Phil heard his heavy tread, descending the stairway.

CHAPTER X

"FOUR EGG" GORE'S REVENGE

PHIL spent a miserable and sleepless night. He could hear the outlaws below conversing in muffled tones, but every now and then, because of the rickety state of the old house, he would overhear a fragment of the conversation. The boy's head ached painfully, as did his body, for the ropes bound tightly both his arms and legs and retarded greatly the circulation of his blood. Finally, Gore and his companions retired for the night and Phil heard their regular breathing and a heavy, rasping snore which he judged emanated from Gore. Outside all was still. Only a faint breeze came rippling through the trees and far in the distance, Phil thought once that he heard the mournful hoot of an owl. But if Phil's

body were quiet, his mind was not. His imagination raced along throughout the entire night and his thoughts were thoughts of dread.

"Golly," he said, "I guess I'm in for it! My only chance is for the police to come out here. Mr. Healy said the gang hoped to clean up when the *China Queen* came home, but that's a couple of days from now, at least. If I could only loosen these ropes maybe I'd have a chance."

Dawn had come and a rosy tint colored the eastern sky. Phil wriggled as noiselessly as possible on the floor of the little room and tried, with expanded arms, to stretch if possible the rope that bound his wrists. Once he thought the rope gave way a bit, and he redoubled his efforts. His exertion was such that he lost his balance and rolled back on the floor, again flat on his back. While trying to stretch the ropes he had, by dint of much squirming, raised himself to a sitting position. Phil heard footsteps outside his door and it opened at

that moment, revealing the ugly visage and form of Sam Scruff.

"Listen, you worm," he said, "stop that movin' 'round. It won't getcha nowhere. One of us is always right outside this door!"

While Phil lay helpless in the outlaws' cabin that day, both Charlie Ammon, who had returned to the city, and Mr. Lovett, the owner of the express company, wondered what had become of him. Charlie explained how he had left Phil guarding the truck while he set out for some gasoline, and that when he returned the boy was gone.

"That certainly is strange," commented Mr. Lovett.

"I been to his roomin' house this mornin'," went on Charlie, "and they ain't even seen him."

"This is serious, Charlie," declared Mr. Lovett. "We both know Phil well enough to know he's the right sort, and I'm mighty worried over his disappearance. Do you know any of his friends?"

"No, I don't," answered Charlie.

"Hold on a minute," exclaimed Mr. Lovett, "Phil's got a friend who's a policeman. He called him up here sometime ago. Gosh, I wish I could think of his name, but I'm switched if I can!"

If only Mr. Lovett's memory had retained the name of Officer Healy! But it had slipped completely out of his mind and poor Phil, cut off entirely from the outside world, lay at the mercy of the ruffians at Skeleton Bay! Phil realized he would have to exercise great care in future attempts to release his bonds because the outlaws had him under constant surveillance. Yet escape he must, for the *China Queen* was not due for several days and in the meantime he knew not what Gore would do. If the renegade became inflamed with liquor most anything could happen. Phil looked again about his little room. There was one tiny window, but only a fragment of glass remained in it.

"Gee," exclaimed Phil, spotting it, "if

I can only crawl over there some way, maybe I could saw these ropes off against the broken pane. I'd have a chance then!"

No sooner did Phil conceive this idea of escape than he started to execute it. By slow and painful wriggling he finally reached the window, and with the support of the wall he was able to raise himself to his knees. Then he lifted his bound wrists over the jagged pane of glass that remained in the window frame and slowly began sawing the rope against its edge. Fortunately for him the ruffians below had opened another bottle and Phil could hear "Baldy" Scott singing an old lay of the sea. Gore and Hansen applauded him vigorously and joined him in the chorus. Phil could not detect, however, the voices of either the Runt or Sam Scruff. Phil was tremendously excited and his breath came in short, hot gasps for he was making progress. He was three-quarters of the way through one of the ropes, then all the way! The second followed in short order and Phil, uttering

a fervent prayer of thankfulness, raised his arms on high in triumph! By hard rubbing he restored circulation to his wrists and hands. It was now easy to release the bonds that tied his ankles. A broken piece of glass sawed them loose in a few minutes.

Phil looked out of the little window, and saw that the ground below was not more than ten or twelve feet. He wondered if it were possible to suspend himself from the sill and drop to the ground, seeking safety at full speed in the heart of the swamp. While he was planning to do this, however, he heard the thump, thump, thump of Sam Scruff's crutch and he realized he was cornered. There was only one thing to do, lie down on the floor, and by a hasty assembling of his ropes about both his wrists and ankles, hope that Scruff would still believe him bound.

"Movin' 'round, weren't you?" was Sam Scruff's greeting as he opened the door and looked suspiciously at Phil.

"How could I?" Phil countered.

"Well, I'll just see if you're tied tight enough afore I leave, my young buck," said Scruff hobbling toward Phil.

The boy knew that if he remained on the floor Scruff would have him at his mercy. So he leaped to his feet, to the amazement of the old renegade, and cried: "No, you won't!"

Scruff raised his crutch and, with a fearful oath, roared at Phil that "he would bash him" if he made a move. Phil sprang to one side. He was quick enough to dodge the crutch which came whistling through the air and at the same time jump toward Scruff. It was easy to topple the latter over, for he could not preserve his balance, with only one leg to support him, and as he fell to the floor Phil darted for the door. He was leaping down them, three steps at a time, when Scruff let out a murderous cry.

"Gore! Gore!" he shouted. "The Squirt's loose! Get him!"

When Phil reached the little sitting room he saw only Gore, in a semi-drunken stupor,

seated at the table, on which rested an empty whisky bottle. Phil dashed past him and reached the open door. His appearance brought Gore out of his daze. With a curse, he leaped to his feet and seized the bottle. Phil, running like mad, had reached the open and was a good twenty feet from the house when Gore, bottle in hand, got to the door. The outlaws' leader, suddenly sobered, raised the bottle aloft, took careful aim, and let fly, and Phil knew nothing from that moment on, for the bottle crashed against the back of his head, knocking him out completely.

"Didja get him," cried Scruff, who was now at the door of the hut.

"Yeah," called back Gore triumphantly as he looked down on the silent form of the youth, "mebbe for good, too!"

"I'll drag him in," sputtered Scruff, fearful that he might have aroused the enmity of Gore by permitting Phil's escape.

"All right," said the leader, "tie him up again, and gag him, too!"

"LISTEN, YOU WORM," HE SAID, "STOP THAT MOVIN' 'ROUND."

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"Shall I take him back upstairs?" asked Scruff when they were once more in the downstairs room of the cabin.

"Naw, leave him here," ordered Gore.

Scruff quickly bound Phil and stuffed a gag in his mouth. All this was easy, for thus far the boy had not recovered consciousness. The old cripple then turned once more to Gore. The latter had been watching him slyly, meantime consuming several glasses of whisky from another bottle that he had produced. Scruff reached for the bottle and was about to pour some into a glass when Gore snarled at him savagely:

"Clear out o' here now, you one-legged rat! This is gonna be my feast and you ain't sittin' at the table, see?"

As Gore spoke he jerked his thumb toward Phil. Scruff, taken aback, retreated before him.

"All right, Sim," he said placatingly, "I'm leavin'."

He walked out of the front door, leaving

Gore alone with Phil. The great brute walked unsteadily over to the boy, and prodded him several times with his foot.

"Come out of it, Squirt!" he commanded. "Come out of it!"

Phil made no response. He still was unconscious. The ruffian poured himself another drink and it was plain to see that the liquor was working him into a fearful rage.

"Come on, come on," he began again. "Wake up! You fooled Sim Gore just once, didn't you? Just once too many, eh? And y'ain't goin' to fool him no more 'cause he's settlin' with you right now!"

Gore rolled up his sleeves, spat on the palms of his hands, and clenched his fists. Then a sudden thought seemed to come to him. He walked over to an open fireplace and picked up an iron poker. A fiendish leer spread over his face as he lifted it and retraced his steps to Phil's side. There he fingered it caressingly and cast many a sly glance at Phil, but whatever he planned in his distorted mind was not performed, for

the Runt, out of breath from fast running, rushed into the room.

"What's up, Sim?" he asked in amazement.

"Lissen, Runt," snarled back Gore, "you lea'me settle this first!"

The Runt, a scowl on his face, grabbed Gore's arm, cursing him as he did so.

"Settle nothin', you fool," he snapped. "Are you goin' to let the big game get away all because o' that whippersnapper? I just been with Desmond. Do you know the *China Queen's* due off the bay in an hour? Snap into it! We gotta move fast!"

The little man let the full force of his words sink in on Gore, then he took the other in kindly fashion by the arm and led him to the door.

"Sober up now, Sim," he cautioned. " 'Baldy' and the 'Ghost' are down in the boat. Scruff'll stay on shore. This time tomorrow, Sim, old boy, we'll be worth thousands! Then you can do what you want to the kid, but now we're after the big stuff!"

When Phil Hardy regained complete consciousness it was night. He lay helpless, his entire body throbbing with pain, and for a long time he was unable to tell where he was. Phil did not know what had struck him. All he remembered was that he had escaped from the cabin and was running swiftly toward freedom when something happened. A strong wind whipped its way through the little cabin, rattling the creaky doors and insecure window frames. Meantime the treacherous waters of Skeleton Bay were curled into snarling, angry waves and as the wind increased these became long, battering billows that crashed with resounding booms along the rocky shore. On a tiny stretch of sandy beach stood "Ghost" Hansen and "Baldy" Scott. Beside them lay box after box, piled together. The "Ghost" was jubilant.

"The storm held off just long enough," he exclaimed, "and let the old *China Queen* treat us right!"

"I'll say she did," was Baldy's comment,

He stopped suddenly and pointed toward the open sea. "Look! What's that?"

The two rogues stood quite still. Far in the distance they made out the form of a ship, but what had caused Baldy's amazement was a rocket fired from the vessel. It illuminated the sky, for an instant, and was followed immediately by another.

"A ship, and them's distress signals, or I miss my guess," said Hansen.

At this point, the Runt and Sam Scruff appeared. The Runt was raging.

"Where's Gore?" he asked. Then answering his own question, he added: "Soppin' up more o' that stuff, eh? The fool, doin' that at this stage o' the game!"

"Look, 'Baldy,'" interrupted Hansen, "that ship's in distress. We better move this stuff and move it quick! Suppose they launch a boat and try to make the shore!"

"They have launched a boat!" cried Baldy in excited tones.

Sure enough, the tossing vessel had dispatched a lifeboat, and even as the rascals

spoke it was breasting its way toward the shore.

"Come on," commanded the Runt; "let's beat it!"

"And leave this stuff here?" asked Scruff.

"Yes, leave it here," said the Runt. "It's only a small part of what we got. The rest is hidden in the cave!"

The four outlaws ran hurriedly down the beach and marvelous it was to see how Scruff kept up with them. He worked his crutch like a pole vaulter would his stick, and made great sweeping strides over the hard sand. A little cave, where they had hidden most of the contraband taken from the *China Queen,* was their destination. When they arrived there, however, Gore was nowhere to be seen.

The Runt's fears regarding "Four Egg" were only too true. The outlaws' leader had been drinking heavily and in his crazed mind there was only one thought. He

lurched alone through the swamp to the shack where Phil, now conscious, lay helpless on the floor.

"He never fergits, does old 'Four Egg,'" muttered Gore to himself when he reached the clearing and saw the tumble-down dwelling before him. "Drink or no drink, he knows what he's about, he does!"

He crept silently around to an open window, thrust his head through and saw Phil, whose back was toward him, lying on the floor.

"Still there!" was Gore's whispered exclamation.

He stole around to the kitchen door and from a box beside the stove lifted a bundle of kindling. He tied this with ropes, then lifted a kerosene can and emptied its contents on the wood, retracing, immediately thereafter, his steps to the window. He scratched a match on his trousers' leg and touched its flame to the oil-soaked wood he held in his hand. It flared forth at once.

Dropping the burning bundle on the parched wooden floor of the cabin, the bandit leader chuckled.

"Good-by, Squirt," were his final words, "you won't bother Sim Gore no more!"

With a final crazy laugh he staggered off into the woods and disappeared.

The flaming bundle soon started on its work of destruction and the wall board beneath the window was the first to crackle ominously. Phil heard the snap and hiss of the fire. He struggled around and saw that both the floor and wall board were ablaze. Terror struck the heart of the youth, for try as much as he could, he made no headway in releasing the ropes that bound him, and the fire, now roaring viciously, crept nearer and nearer to him. Meantime, billows of smoke enveloped him.

"I guess this is the end—and I can't even call for help," thought Phil hopelessly.

He made one final effort to burst his bonds, but his strength was gone and he fell back on the floor, once more unconscious.

CHAPTER XI

MR. DENNISON'S RETURN

As THE flames mounted in the little cabin, and smoke poured from the windows and doors, a roly-poly man, his cheeks wet with perspiration, ran through the forest.

"There ought to be help where that light comes from," he said to himself. An instant later he was in the clearing and saw the blazing hut. He hurried, panting and almost out of breath, to the front door. On the floor, and fortunately not in the direct path of the flames, lay the still form of Phil Hardy.

"Hello!" exclaimed the stranger. "Overcome! I'm just in time."

He reached down and lifted the boy in his arms and made the door just as a ripping, tearing sound, accompanied by leaping

flames, gave evidence of the collapse of the wall. Had it occurred a second sooner Phil would have been buried beneath the burning débris.

The fat man reached the clearing and there, in the light of the burning building, stooped to examine the person whose life he had saved. He took one look.

"Phil Hardy!" he exclaimed, great tears of gratitude coursing down his cheeks. "Tied and gagged, too! Bless my buttons, the good Lord sure enough led me to this spot."

And old Jason Royle, for it was he, knelt on bended knees and thanked God for his mercy.

"I was just in time," he repeated. "Come to, Sonny, come to! Old Jason Royle's a talkin' to you!"

Whipping out a knife, Jason severed the ropes that bound Phil and released the gag stuffed in his mouth. Then he worked feverishly over the boy, rubbing his arms and legs, and pouring water, which he obtained

from a near-by stream, over his face. He held Phil tightly in his arms, and shouted with triumph when the boy wearily opened his eyes. When Phil saw it was Jason who held him, his consciousness returned with a bound.

"Jason!" he cried.

"None other!" replied Jason, both laughing and weeping in hysterical fashion, then almost immediately verbally reprimanding himself for what he thought was a weakness.

"Cryin' like an old spinster! Stop it, you old idiot!" was the command given by Jason to Jason.

"Oh, Jason!" exclaimed Phil again and again.

The old cook lost no time, when he regained control over his emotions, in telling Phil his story.

" 'Twas the good Lord, Sonny," he began seriously. "Nothin' else! The *Lass o' London's* hard aground on the shoals out yonder. I come ashore in a small boat. We

seen somebody on the beach, but Lord bless me, they wasn't a soul that remained in sight when we landed. I seen the light o' this cabin burnin', and not knowin' what it was, headed this way. You know the rest, Sonny."

Phil, meanwhile, at the insistence of Jason, gave a hurried sketch of his adventures.

"Let's be up and out o' here before the murderers show up," was Jason's counsel when Phil concluded.

"Listen, Jason," cautioned Phil, holding a finger to his lips. "Someone's coming through the swamp."

The old cook and the boy listened intently from behind a clump of bushes. They heard a splash or two, as if someone inadvertently had missed his footing and slipped into the stagnant pools of the swamp, and then, to their amazement, they saw "Four Egg" Gore lurch into the clearing.

"It's Gore," whispered Phil.

"And he's been drinkin', or my eyes deceive me," replied Jason.

Gore staggered along feebly. The cabin, gutted by flames, was only a smoldering pile of embers. The outlaw looked at it strangely, then laughed aloud, and his chuckle produced an unsuspected reaction in Phil Hardy. The boy suddenly discovered that he was no longer excited. Instead, he was cool and calm and a righteous anger burned within him. He turned quietly to Jason.

"Let's tackle him," he said. "He tried to kill me, Jason!"

"I'm on, Sonny!" was Jason's courageous reply.

Phil stepped out from behind his shelter, with Jason closely behind him. The boy had expected resistance from Gore, but the ruffian, when he saw him, let out a wild cry and sank to the ground, covering his eyes with his hands.

"A ghost!" he screamed.

What followed was easy. Phil and Jason bound Gore hand and foot, and gagged him, using the very ropes and gag that Jason

had removed from Phil. The ruffian made no resistance whatsoever.

"If he hadn't been drunk and scared, though," said Jason when their task was completed, "we might've had trouble. But we've got him now, Sonny!"

Between the two of them, Phil and Jason dragged Gore's great hulk from the clearing into the depths of the swamp. As each mentally planned ways and means of reaching safety, with their captive, they little knew that assistance was close at hand. Shortly before dawn, however, police headquarters was in the throes of excitement, and the inspector on duty summoned Officer Healy and the members of the rifle squad to his office.

"The *China Queen's* reported this side of Skeleton Bay," he announced. "Get out there at once!"

"Come on, boys," cried Pat, rifle in hand, mounting the huge motor car at the curbing, "they won't give us the slip this time!"

An instant later the police car, at eighty

miles an hour, roared over the lonely highway toward Skeleton Bay!

"It's almost daylight, Jason," whispered Phil. "Let's get started!"

Phil and Jason had sat alongside the silent form of Gore throughout the night but now, with the approach of dawn, the necessity of a flight to safety was apparent.

"Well, Sonny," said Jason, "only one of us can go 'cause the other one'll have to stay here and watch this bird. We don't want him to get away!"

"You better go," continued the old cook. "You know your way 'round and I don't. Get to the highway and the first telephone you can and call for help."

"All right," said Phil, darting off into the swamp. As he carefully made his way through the tangled wildwood, Phil said earnestly:

"This time I'm going to win out! I'll get help and we'll round up every one of this terrible gang!"

"Hands up!"

The voice that uttered these words rang out commandingly through the silent forest. Phil Hardy, taken completely by surprise, looked up and thirty feet away from him, saw the forbidding form of the Runt, revolver in hand, leveled directly at him. Phil threw up his hands.

"Guess this is as far as you'll be going," snarled the Runt, walking steadily toward the boy. Phil, arms aloft, watched him narrowly. He saw the Runt stumble just a fraction over a half-hidden root, and at that moment Phil leaped behind a near-by tree. The Runt, recovering himself almost at once, fired, but the shot went wild, and Phil, looking about for a weapon, picked up a large stone at the base of the tree, and shot this with all his might at the ruffian. The missile struck the Runt on his shoulder, and he screamed with pain.

"Two can play this game!" cried Phil. He hastily picked up several other stones but when he peered from behind the tree, the Runt, who had already sought cover

himself, fired again and Phil thought he heard the bullet whistle by him. Minutes seemed hours to Phil as he waited for the next move. He heard a second command: "Hands up!" The voice was not that of the Runt's, however, but Phil believed it to be a confederate.

"You'll get no 'hands up' from me," he shouted.

"The divil we won't," called out the voice. "We've got your pal!"

"Who are you?" cried Phil, a great hope arising within him.

"Twinty-four arms o' the law, to be exact," came back the answer in a full, rich brogue.

"Hooray!" shouted Phil, jumping from behind his tree and into full view of a policeman, who stood with rifle leveled at him. Another officer, pistol in hand, was slipping handcuffs on the Runt.

"Well, I'll be," exclaimed the first policeman, who had Phil covered, "and what Christmas tree did you fall off of?"

A broad smile covered the officer's face as he relaxed his hold on the rifle.

"You're Phil Hardy, ain't ye?" he asked. Phil nodded assent rapidly. "Well," continued the other, "Pat Healy's told us all about ye. He's out here with us!"

At that moment, Phil caught sight of honest, old Pat Healy, rifle in hand, and yelled to him. Healy, tremendously excited, dropped his gun and came forward. He threw his arms around Phil.

"I can't believe me eyes," he exclaimed. "Phil, me boy, this is too good to be true!"

"It's wonderful, Mr. Healy," said Phil fervently.

"And we've got 'em all but one," went on Healy. "We've Hansen, Scott and Scruff, and the Runt over there! But Gore, the divil, got away! Now lad, tell me your story!"

"Not yet," said Phil, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"What's up now?" asked Healy.

"Never you mind—follow me," were Phil's instructions as he darted off into the swamp, with Pat Healy trying to keep up with him. Phil led the officer a merry chase, going this way and that, back tracking and turning, and finally coming to an abrupt halt.

"There!" he said with joy, as Healy came up to him. He pointed at the same time to a massive tree, beneath which lay "Four Egg" Gore, and beside whom stood old Jason Royle.

"Will wonders niver cease!" exclaimed Healy in amazement. "'Four Egg' Gore hisself and Jason Royle hisself!"

Words fail to tell the joy Phil Hardy felt over the successful capture of all the desperadoes at Skeleton Bay, nor can we adequately measure the elation of the boy, Officer Healy and Jason Royle over their reunion. Healy blew his police whistle and two officers, thus summoned, took charge of "Four Egg" Gore.

"Won't the papers eat up the news o' what's happened to-day?" asked Healy joyfully.

"Indeed they will," declared Jason with vigor.

"I've sint the boys back with their birds and we three'll go back together," continued Healy. "And there's no need o' you worryin' over the *Lass o' London,* Jason. I got word that two tugs pulled her off the bar this mornin' at high tide. She's docked by this time!"

"We're keepin' everything a secret, me lads, until the job's all cleaned up. That won't be more than two hours from now because the first confession we got—'Ghost' Hansen squealed two minutes after we nabbed him, you know—jumped old Desmond Skinner into the fryin' pan. I want you in at the finish, Phil. We'll go back now and grab that buzzard!"

Officer Healy announced that another car, dispatched from headquarters, awaited them on the highway, so, arm in arm, the three

set out. The great somber trees of Skeleton Bay never looked down on a more joyous reunion than that of Phil, Pat Healy and Jason. The woods resounded with their laughter and old Jason felt so good about everything that he broke into song. As they walked toward the automobile, Jason, in full, round notes, sang this queer old chant of the seas:

"I've sailed the ships o' the seven seas
Through snow and sleet and rain—
I've walked in blood clear up to my knees,
But now I'm home again!"

Phil and Officer Healy applauded with great ado the singing efforts of old Jason, and the chubby cook bowed in comic politeness before them. They reached the highway and boarded their motor. Healy instructed the driver to proceed at once to headquarters.

"Well, Inspector," said Healy when he was closeted with that official, "are the boys back?"

"You bet they are, Pat," said the inspec-

tor with a broad grin, "and the five jailbirds are locked up safely, too. You did a great job!"

"It ain't finished yet," replied Healy, "and it won't be until I get the sixth one. Then the job'll be done. The newspaper boys ain't got on to this yet, have they?"

"Nary a word's leaked out."

"That's fine! I'll have Desmond Skinner, the ringleader, in here inside of an hour."

"Well, don't be too gentle with him, Pat," said the inspector, with a sly twinkle in his eyes.

"Gintle, huh?" snorted Pat. "You leave that to me and the lad I'm takin' with me to be in at the finish!"

Officer Healy rejoined Phil and Jason outside the inspector's office. With only Phil as company, however, they started out to the general offices of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. Jason, meantime, went to the Healy home.

"I'd taken Jason along," explained

Healy to the boy, "but we want to catch this fellow unawares. The fewer there are of us the better we'll be. Skinner don't suspect anything!"

Perry, the pompous little secretary, looked up in fear and amazement as Healy and Phil entered the office.

"Is Skinner in?" demanded the officer.

"Gracious!" ejaculated the secretary, menaced by the stern look on the faces of both Healy and Phil. The latter saw that the door to Skinner's private office was ajar, but he did not know that Skinner had already seen them and was slipping a revolver into his coat pocket, and reaching for his hat.

"The police!" exclaimed Skinner with dread. "Well, they won't catch me!"

With a suave smile, he walked out of his office and approached the railing where stood Healy and Phil.

"How do you do, Officer," he began pleasantly, then suddenly whisking the revolver from his pocket he used the butt end and

dealt Healy a staggering blow on the head. At the same moment he leaped the railing and dashed for the door, but Phil was too quick for him! The youth stuck out his right foot and tripped the other, sending him sprawling to the floor. At the same time Phil leaped on him and held tightly the hand in which Skinner's revolver reposed.

"I've got him," cried Phil.

Shaking his head rapidly, Officer Healy regained his scattered thoughts, and also leaped for Skinner. In an instant he had the man's revolver and had clicked handcuffs on him.

"B'gob," exclaimed Healy gratefully, "Hiven be praised I brought you along! Otherwise this snake'd given me the slip. But we've got him now! Lad," continued Healy thankfully, "we've got 'em all, and here's the ringleader!"

Hardly had Healy completed his sentence when the outer door opened and a voice called out:

"What's the meaning of all this?"

Phil looked up. There, before him, stood Mr. Dennison, dignified and kindly, but a puzzled look on his face as he surveyed Skinner lying on the floor, his wrists manacled.

"Mr. Dennison!" cried Phil, rushing toward him.

The shipping magnate, ruddy-faced and healthy looking, extended his hand warmly to Phil.

"Phil, my boy, what's happened?" he asked.

"Plinty, Mr. Dennison," said Healy, approaching him. "You just got back in time!"

"But I don't understand it, Mr. Healy," continued the other. "What's Mr. Skinner done that he should be beaten up and handcuffed like a criminal?"

It was at this moment that several other bluecoats put in an appearance and quietly took hold of Desmond Skinner. Then Healy arched his eyebrows as a signal to

Mr. Dennison, and silently beckoned him into his private office. There, with door closed, and only Phil in attendance, the policeman told Mr. Dennison the entire story of Skinner's treachery and crookedness. He explained how, in Mr. Dennison's absence, Phil had been discharged. At this point, Healy asked Phil if he would step out of the room and when the lad had done so, the old policeman told how the youngster had suffered and dwelt at length on his courage and fidelity in rounding up the criminals that made up Skinner's gang.

Mr. Dennison listened intently to the officer's every word.

"Why, Mr. Healy," he ejaculated when the policeman had concluded, "that boy is a hero! May God bless his stanch and noble heart!"

"I'll say 'Amen' to that, Mr. Dennison."

"Well," continued the policeman, arising. "I'll be after followin' Skinner to the hoosegow. Phil will go with me, but you can talk to him later!"

CHAPTER XII

CLIMBING BACK ON THE LADDER OF SUCCESS

Mr. Dennison, his health completely restored by his long rest at sea, never worked more energetically in his life than during the twenty-four hours that had elapsed since he first saw Phil and Officer Healy. He sent a certain telegram at once to Pleasanton and he personally "bossed" a special crew of workmen at the offices of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. The next day, when everything was in readiness, he telephoned Officer Healy, and instructed the latter to come to the office at once with Phil.

"Well, sir," said Mr. Dennison, smiling to himself, "I've got everything ready. Phil ought to be here any minute now!"

Mr. Dennison was excited and jubilantly so. There was no mistake about it, for one

could see it in the nervous manner in which he paced up and down his office, examined his watch every few moments, and otherwise showed his anxiety for the speedy arrival of Phil. Officer Healy accompanied Phil to the door of the offices, then begged to be excused.

"I think Mr. Dennison is after wantin' to see ye privately," he explained. "I'll come in later."

When Phil entered Mr. Dennison's private office, the older man rushed forward to him.

"My dear boy," he said, patting his shoulder, "I can't tell you how grateful I am! Come with me!"

He led Phil out into the corridor and pointed proudly to the lettering on an adjoining door. It read:

"Mr. Philip Hardy"

Phil could hardly believe his eyes. He felt his face redden as he stared at the door.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Phil in confusion—

a confusion, incidentally, that Mr. Dennison enjoyed hugely.

"Open the door, my boy!" was Mr. Dennison's next order.

Phil, haltingly, pushed open the door, but his first view of the splendid office was instantly erased when he spied a slight figure, sitting in a chair beside the huge desk at the far corner of the room.

"Mother!" cried Phil.

Mrs. Hardy arose to greet her son, and for the next few seconds they embraced each other.

"Oh, Phil, I'm so proud of you!" she said.

"Not any more than I am, Mrs. Hardy," declared Mr. Dennison heartily.

"And now just one more thing, Phil," said the shipping magnate, "and you can play off from work as long as you want. I'd like to have you and your mother meet someone else—the new chief steward of the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation!"

With a merry twinkle in his eyes, Mr.

Dennison led Phil and Mrs. Hardy to another doorway down the corridor. He tapped gently and it opened and there, clad in a gorgeous checkered suit, and with every other evidence of great prosperity, stood old Jason Royle!

"Jason!" cried Phil.

"Mr. Royle!" exclaimed Mrs. Hardy.

"At your service, folks, from now on!" Jason boomed in reply, a happy smile beaming forth from his honest and kindly face.

Mr. Dennison more than outdid himself so far as Officer Healy was concerned and several weeks later the genial and ruggedly honest Irishman found that he had been promoted to a sergeancy. This meant more pay and consequently greater comforts for Pat's ever-faithful Mary. Tim, the policeman's boy, who worshiped Phil more than ever, was also taken in hand by Mr. Dennison and given a good position with the Seven Seas Shipping Corporation. Needless to say, the first thing Mr. Dennison had done was to clean up the remaining money Phil

owed on his mother's home and by the payment of a substantial reward to Phil for his fidelity and courage, the boy was able to repay Jason the money he had loaned him in his hour of stress.

Mrs. Hardy was persuaded to remain in the city for nearly a month, but the lure of the country and her garden was too strong and she returned to Pleasanton. Phil made it a point to visit her regularly and she likewise made constant visits to the city to see him.

Several months later we find Phil, busy at work in his splendid office. Mr. Dennison entered and took a chair across the desk from Phil.

"How are you coming on, Phil?" he asked.

"I never knew work could be so interesting," declared the boy with emphasis.

Mr. Dennison arose and walked slowly to a large map of the world which hung on the wall.

"That's our field of operations," he said.

"We have interests in almost every nation appearing on that map. And Phil, you've made such fine and steady progress that I believe you're ready for bigger things. Would you like to travel?"

Phil's eyes sparkled and he could hardly contain the excitement he felt.

"Gee, Mr. Dennison, I'd love it!" he exclaimed.

The older man pursed his lips and looked serious. But the mission he picked out for the boy and the perils and adventures that confronted him must be reserved for *Phil Hardy's Greatest Test.*

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